

***‘There Is Magic In Everyone’ The Representation of Disability
in Witch Hat Atelier***

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) Degree in Animation DL832. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will explore how author and illustrator Kamome Shirahama represents people with disabilities in her manga *Witch Hat Atelier*. I wish to highlight the efficacy of manga as a medium in delivering messages to a global audience (owing to manga's massive worldwide success from a cultural and financial standpoint) by employing both visual and narrative techniques such as allegory, metaphor and abstraction. By analysing the disabled characters of the series both visually and textually, and using writings discussing such subjects as reference material, I aim to discuss why and how their positive representation matters given the medium and cultural context in which they exist.

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Introduction

Witch Hat Atelier is a manga series written and illustrated by Kamome Shirahama, and published by Kodansha Comics in 2016. The series is set in the Zozah Peninsula, a land filled with wondrous beasts, fantastical legends and witches. Though the setting and world is steeped in high fantasy, its narrative has a more grounded throughline as it raises questions about many aspects of our society in real life- particularly, how people with disabilities are treated.

The story itself follows Coco, the young daughter of a tailor who dreams to become a witch one day. Her hopes are dashed, however, when she is told that not everyone can be a witch, and one must be born as such to use magic. One day however, during a festival Coco is given a book of magical seals and a pen with which to draw them by a mysterious individual in a brimmed hat, and after tracing the seals she unwittingly performs forbidden magic, trapping her mother in crystal. She is taken in by the witch Qifrey as an apprentice in his atelier in order to learn the ways of magic and one day free her mother, and over the course of her apprenticeship her eyes are opened to the truth of magic and the moral quandaries that surround it.

Throughout the story, many characters are introduced who have some form of a disability, which are explored throughout the narrative in various ways and as a means to question how our society in real life treats people with disabilities. *Witch Hat Atelier*, for many reasons, is the perfect avenue for thoughtful, sensitive and progressive discussions to be had, and for disabled people to be able to see themselves. The methods and means which Kamome Shirahama employ bear discussing, as they all come together in an extremely well-constructed and ground-breaking series in terms of how it represents disability.

When discussing Michel de Certeau's essay "The Savage 'I'", David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder suggest that "*The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss in the known world and, thus, the language of a tale seeks to*

comprehend that which has stepped out of line.”¹ *Witch Hat Atelier*’s narrative is built on the notion that our modern society lacks the accommodations and advancements necessary to provide the disabled and socially underprivileged population with the same opportunities as everyone else. The treatment of disabled people in Japan (considering it is where the author is from)- and in the world as a whole- is the very thing that calls the story of *Witch Hat Atelier* into being.

It is estimated by the Japanese health ministry that over 7 percent of the Japanese population are disabled- according to how disability is officially categorised by them. In 2019, the Japanese Diet passed a bill in which thousands of victims of the Eugenic Protection Law- which was brought into effect in 1948- were to receive financial compensation of 3.2 million yen each. The law aimed to “prevent birth of inferior descendants from the eugenic point of view, and to protect life and health of mother, as well” via compulsory- and involuntary- sterilisation of people with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities. This law was repealed as recently as 1996, and only 23 years on did the ~16,500 people who suffered as a result see this compensation. Katsunori Fujii, chairman of the Japan Council on Disability claimed that both the compensation and apology issued by the Diet were “*not enough*”.

Since then, the general treatment of disabled people in Japan has improved with the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (an international human rights treaty proposed by the United Nations) in 2014, alongside the development and recognition of several initiatives meant to improve the rights of disabled people in Japan. Despite the improvements, many still claim that Japan has quite a ways to go when it comes to adequate treatment and recognition of disabled people. In an interview with the BBC Ouch podcast in 2021, Mizuki Hsu, a community inclusion advisor and inclusion project manager at Google and wheelchair user said that “*There’s still a lack of accessibility at school and the workplace and public areas, and less opportunity for people with disabilities to participate in those social activities and engage with other people. And there’s still strong stigma around people with disabilities.*”²

¹ T. Mitchell, D. and L. Snyder, S., 2000. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disabilities and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press.

² Rose, Beth. “*The Lowdown on Being Disabled in Japan.*” *BBC Ouch!*, BBC, 26 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09t8ycq>.

Similarly, the treatment of disabled people worldwide has a long and oftentimes ugly history. Nazi euthanasia programs, the involuntary admitting of millions of people into mental institutions, and general lack of necessary accommodations which still carry over to modern day society are but a few instances of disabled people being treated as lesser than the rest of the global population.

Chapter 1: How Manga Effectively Fosters Empathy Through Abstraction

When *Witch Hat Atelier's* characters call into question the treatment of those in their society meant to act as representations of people with disabilities in our society, it comes from a very real place. Through the employment of fiction, these facts are not only delivered to the audience but called into question and actively challenged in an engaging way that naturally causes the reader to empathise and understand them. *"Speculative fiction gives me an efficient route in showing disabled frustration and struggle, without lengthy set-up and exposition. When we use speculative fiction to talk about disability, we allow the reader, regardless of their ability status, to feel the frustration a disabled person feels, rather than just intellectually understanding that ableism exists."*³

Manga is massively popular worldwide- particularly in Japan, its birthplace. As of now, the Japanese manga industry is valued at around ¥612.6 billion⁴. Meanwhile, in North America, manga accounts for 27 percent of the entire market share of the comics industry, and is the second most popular category of comic.⁵ European countries such as Italy, Germany and France are large consumers of manga⁶, and overall, the manga industry is booming worldwide as the market sees exponential growth year by year. This indicates that millions of people read manga worldwide, from multiple different countries and by extension backgrounds, races, genders, etc. This raises the question: what about manga makes it so popular with such a wide audience?

³ Showalter, R., 2021. Writing Fantasy Lets Me Show The Whole Truth Of Disability. [online] Electric Literature. Available at: <https://electricliterature.com/writing-fantasy-lets-me-show-the-whole-truth-of-disability>

³ "Topic: Manga Industry In Japan". *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/topics/7559/manga-industry-in-japan>

⁴ Bain, Marc. "How Japan'S Global Image Morphed From Military Empire To Eccentric Pop-Culture Superpower". *Quartz*, 2022, <https://qz.com/1806376/japans-image-has-changed-from-fierce-to-lovable-over-the-decades/amp/>.

⁵ d
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/201658984_Manga_in_Europe_A_Short_Study_of_Market_and_Fandom.

In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud discusses the idea of signs and symbols being “*the basis of language*”. Signs and symbols, through abstraction, can contain a multitude of meanings that can all be shared between viewers regardless of the language they speak, the country they originate from or their lived experiences- thus why furniture assembly guides and airplane evacuation instructions are illustrated. They are an efficient and effective way to translate an idea without words to every possible viewer, giving them universal appeal. Not only this, but the very practise of ‘abstracting’ these images makes them more easily read and concise, “*stripping it down to its essential meaning*” and thus amplifying that meaning “*in a way that realistic art can’t.*”⁷



Figure 1: Illustration demonstrating abstraction, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud

This concept is easily applied to comics and manga. When a viewer looks at a drawing of a character, they don't see it just as a series of lines on a page, they see a character. And, by extension, when a character is seen, a character is felt and understood. According to Scott McCloud, “*We humans are a self-centred race. We see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist, and we make the world over in our image.*”⁸ So even when someone reads a picture book such as *The Snowman*, for example, and view what is technically just a series of lines and shapes on a page, they instead see the snowman himself- not as just an image, but as a character. When the boy, devastated, sees his beloved friend has melted, the reader is able to empathise in the same way that they would be faced with this scene in real life- perhaps even more so.

Liz Logan, quoting the Centre for Building a Culture of Empathy, suggests that their description of empathy as “*four spokes on a wheel: self-empathy, or mindfulness of what's going on inside oneself; mirrored empathy, meaning taking on another person's emotion; imaginative empathy, which involves putting yourself in another person's shoes;*

⁷ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harpercollins, 1993, pp. 30, 128.

⁸ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harpercollins, 1993.

and empathic action, i.e., contributing to the well-being of others."⁹ plays a major role in art making. When speaking about the artist Riva Lehrer's work, she states "*Lehrer's work partly involves "mirrored" empathy—i.e., recognizing and relating to others' emotions—while fiction writers are often employing "imaginative" empathy, by putting themselves in their characters' shoes. For SAIC Professor of Writing Jesse Ball, empathy is an integral part of his process. He has written numerous books, including novels and poetry collections.*"¹⁰ Thus it can be suggested that manga, as an intersection between both art and writing, is a highly effective medium to express empathy through and receive empathy from.

This taken into account, another question may be asked; what makes manga an effective means through which to deliver messages and raise ideas?

In *Witch Hat Atelier*, Kamome Shirahama constructs a world which is both similar and entirely different to our own. The Zozah Peninsula acts as both a mirror and a 'refraction' of our world. The main characters are all human with desires, personalities and thought processes exactly the same as our own. The difference in *Witch Hat Atelier's* world to ours is not in the nature of its characters, but in its setting and culture, and in the presence of magic. The struggles that people go through in the manga align with those that they do in our world, but are presented to us through a different lens: the lens of fiction.

Drawing the reader into a fictional world makes it easier to deliver messages to them with the added context of said world. Problems and issues that characters are faced with become ones we can both understand and even relate to when we've followed a character's story arc and gained insight into them as a person and the world they live in. The reader may not actually be a little girl thrust into a world of magic and strife, but when they immerse themselves in a fictional narrative, they *become* that character, enough to understand and empathise with them, and thus internalise any lessons they learn and any challenges they face. In some ways, it may be easier for people to

⁹ "EMPATHY: All About Empathy: A Portal For Information: Articles, Definitions, Links, Videos, Etc. About Empathy And Compassion". *Cultureofempathy.Com*, <http://cultureofempathy.com/>.

¹⁰ Logan, Liz. "The Art Of Empathy". *School Of The Art Institute Of Chicago*, <https://www.saic.edu/news/marketing-communications/art-empathy-0>.

empathise with fictional characters than with real people, considering characters in fiction are specifically constructed from the ground up to be relatable by their creator; to be a vessel for the audience. Even in cases when the audience may not be able to relate directly to a given character, that in itself can be used as an effective way to deliver a concept or idea to them. *Why don't you relate to them? Why do you? Would you react the same way as they are to this problem or event?*

Additionally, suspension of disbelief and open-mindedness to a narrative becomes a lot easier to possess when the narrative takes place in a world or context that is entirely divorced from our own. When the audience is able to make too many direct comparisons to the world they already exist in day to day when immersing themselves in a fictional world, it opens up opportunities to question what is going on within the narrative when juxtaposed with their own reality, and when set against their own personal biases. Thus, messages that the creator may be trying to deliver may become muddled or lost. This being said, Mark J.P. Wolf in his book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* discusses the philosophical idea of 'possible worlds' in relation to imaginary worlds and our own world, and how they legitimize the idea that "*fiction can contain certain kinds of truth.*"¹¹ "There always has been and likely always will be a tendency by creators to incorporate aspects of their own lived experiences into the fictional worlds they create, which in and of itself makes them easy to empathize with. In all, it can be said that finding a perfect midpoint between fantasy and reality when it comes to creating a world in which a story is set makes for a perfect setting that invites readers and viewers to relate, empathize and immerse themselves in.

As such, *Witch Hat Atelier's* high fantasy world filled with winged horses, floating spherical islands and ancient civilisations turned to gold alongside people living normal lives and struggling with normal things acts as the perfect means through which Kamome Shirahama can deliver messages to the audience and draw them in to the setting. Specifically, given magic's nature as a powerful force granted to only a select few people through birth right and nepotism, and given its importance in the

¹¹ Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds*. Routledge, 2012, pp. 17 - 20

world, it acts as the perfect narrative device through which to explore how classism, ableism and circumstance can affect people.

The exploration of this topic using the backdrop of a constructed, fictional world allows the mangaka to present ideas and criticisms of our own world in a way which not only weaves itself seamlessly into the narrative, but sheds light on the complexities and different aspects of the topic in a more concise, concentrated and profound way than a simple think piece written about the state of our society and its treatment of people with disabilities would.



Figure 2: Tartah and Coco on changing the status quo, Witch Hat Atelier, Chapter 45, Kamome Shirahama

Over the course of a single story arc and punctuated with these panels, a conversation is started about how accommodations can and should be made for those with disabilities to make their lives and experiences easier and more accessible. The addition of magic to this story as a metaphor for privilege and the ability to enact change for those less privileged than you make the ideas raised here easily digestible

and concise. *“The ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and in drawing generally.”*¹²

Witch Hat Atelier, as a fictional narrative, can be moulded and shaped into the ideal vessel through which to deliver the answers to the questions that our society poses, in a way that a non-fictional piece of text simply cannot. *“The media can be a vital instrument in raising awareness, countering stigma and misinformation. It can be a powerful force to change societal misconceptions and present persons with disabilities as individuals that are a part of human diversity. By increasing the awareness and understanding of disability issues and the diversity of persons with disabilities and their situations, the media can actively contribute to an effective and successful integration of persons with disabilities in all aspects of societal life”*.¹³

In adding a layer of fiction, the concepts which Kamome Shirahama is trying to convey are actually delivered in a more direct way than any other form of writing ever could. And, as previously discussed in this chapter, by telling this story through a visual medium such as manga, it is more easily and successfully conveyed to a broad audience in an appealing and easily understood manner.

With all of this in mind, manga is evidently the perfect way for a story such as *Witch Hat Atelier* to be told, and for many other stories of its kind. Abstraction is employed both visually and narratively by the author to effectively and succinctly deliver its messages, drawing every ounce of potential manga as a medium has out.

¹² McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harpercollins, 1993.

¹³ "Disability And The Media | United Nations Enable". *Un.Org*, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/disability-and-the-media.html>.

Chapter 2: Magic and Contraptions as Metaphors for Ableism and Privilege

Magic in *Witch Hat Atelier* is a complex thing, in more ways than one. The series doesn't invent the concept of magic itself- which has been around in fiction and myth for time immemorial- but it does portray it in a unique way that lets it act as a vehicle for many different ideas and concepts surrounding disability and ableism. In manga and anime, even though it is common for magic to be used as "*a metaphor for the exploration of a range of cultural, philosophical and psychological concerns*"¹⁴, the way in which *Witch Hat Atelier* treats magic as a metaphor for privilege and ableism is a new approach. It reflects the changing attitudes of people towards disabled people and portrayals of them in media, and invites more.

Anyone can do magic and be a witch. We learn this early on in the story when Coco, who was previously told by her mother that she could not be a witch due to not having been born as one, performs magic by tracing over glyphs in a book. Using a pen and special ink derived from the silver-wood tree, witches draw intricate sigils and create glyphs which can bend the elements of the world to their will, create wondrous contraptions, and most importantly, aid those around them. Anybody can be a witch so long as they can hold a pen, but this fact is concealed from those not born into a family of witches. Long ago, several witches used magic to commit heinous acts of violence and destruction, which sank the world into darkness. To restore balance to the world, a pact was formed wherein it was agreed that only a select few people would be allowed to wield magic, and the rest would be purposely kept in the dark and have their memories erased should they ever learn that magic is a learned ability rather than an innate one. The Knights Moralis uphold this pact, and wipe the memory of any non-witch (also referred to as Unknowing) who breaks it in order to uphold peace and prevent the past from repeating itself.

Magic is somewhat of a luxury in the Zozah Peninsula. There are several instances of Unknowings wishing that they could cast spells like witches do, as it would make their lives easier or more exciting and fun.

¹⁴ Cavallaro, Dani. *Magic As Metaphor In Anime*. Mcfarland & Co., Publ., 2010.



Figure 3: Coco laments not being born as a witch, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 1, Kamome Shirahama

Unknowings have access to magic in indirect ways, however, through the use of contraptions. Contraptions are objects infused with magic by incorporating glyphs into their designs to make them perform a function they otherwise couldn't without the presence of magic. Witches create these objects as a means of making certain tasks easier- both for themselves and for others who don't possess magic. Examples include Sylph Shoes, which grant the wearer flight, the Snugstone, which radiates a pleasant warmth without the need for an open flame and pots that can keep food fresh for years. The character Olruggio specialises in making these contraptions, with a specific focus on contraptions that help those who don't possess magic themselves and those who



Figure 4: Olruggio helps a child with sensory issues, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 39, Kamome Shirahama

need the help they can provide.

Contraptions have nearly infinite possibilities in what they can do, just as magic has, and Olruggio is seen coming up with many creative ideas for contraptions that aid people in many ways- most often, in ways that grant disabled people without magic comfort and accessibility. Olruggio serves to show us that the ways magic can help people are almost innumerable.

Magic does have its limits, however. The pact that was formed states that any magic that directly alters the human form is strictly outlawed- that includes healing magic. This is, again, due to the actions of witches in the past who made themselves into abominations in the pursuit of power. While the intent with banning such magic- referred to as forbidden magic- may be noble, many characters over the course of the story question the morality of withholding magic that could greatly help people. Coustas's character arc explores this moral issue.

Coustas is a young boy who is first introduced in the story in Chapter 10. Born into severe poverty, he makes a living alongside his adoptive father figure Dagda as a minstrel by dancing and performing for money on the streets. This changes, however, when the caravan he and Dagda were travelling on alongside other merchants is caught up in a flood, and he insists on retrieving the goods that were washed away by the water. He gets injured while trying to do this, and is saved thanks to Coco and the witches of Qifrey's atelier's magic, but his legs are irreversibly damaged in the process and he loses his ability to walk.

One way in which people without the use of their legs can get around in the Zozah peninsula is through the use of a Sealchair; a magical contraption carved out of wood and given the ability to transport its user through the use of a magical seal drawn onto its underside. Although this contraption is undoubtedly helpful, it comes with its downsides. It is clunky and hard to manoeuvre and can't navigate uneven surfaces very well.

When we are first reintroduced to Coustas after he sustained the injuries which made him lose the use of his legs, we see he now relies on a Sealchair to get around. His reintroduction begins with him falling down the stairs thanks to how clumsy his Sealchair is. He moves down the panels, and down the whole page. This represents his sustained disability and how he feels about it; powerless, as if he's fallen down from where he once was as a person. Not only this, but the panels he appears in are cramped and claustrophobic. He doesn't command much presence in them, and his sealchair is almost always present within them just as much as he is, if not more. At this stage in the story, his disability is a source of grief for him thanks to the lack of any means for him to easily live with it beyond a Sealchair that can't even navigate stairs properly.

Moments after Coco and Tartah catch Coustas, we see him upright for the first time since his injury, and for the last time until many chapters later. He's held aloft by the two witches here using magic, not bound by his Sealchair, his whole body in the frame—most importantly, in the *centre* of the frame. This acts as a clear signifier of magic's ability to help Coustas live with his disability and live close to the way he did before he was injured, and also serves to foreshadow Coco



Figure 6: Coco and Tartah hold Coustas up, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 42, Kamome Shirahama

and Tartah's future creation of the contraption which would help Coustas fly. Additionally, as

Gillian Rose discusses in her book *Visual Methodologies*, the positioning of a figure or form in an image “construct a particular viewing position ‘outside’ the photo”¹⁵ both in a literally and philosophical/emotional sense—how we as the viewer see Coustas according to how he is ‘positioned’ in relation to use colours our perception of him and his character as a whole. Coustas's legs are also in full view—albeit, bandaged. In every panel he appears in after this, his legs are either out of frame or displayed only when he's referring to them directly or in moments of grief or

frustration. This panel implies that it isn't his legs that Coustas should be or *are* ashamed of—its the fact that he's ‘trapped’ in a Sealchair as a lacklustre means of getting around.



Figure 5: Coustas falls down the stairs, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 42, Kamome Shirahama

¹⁵ Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies*. Sage, 2016.

Once Coco and Tartah give Coustas the cloak they made him, however, we again see Coustas' full body- legs included. He's rising up through the page this time alongside Coco and Tartah, freer than he's ever been, and he occupies a full two-page spread as opposed to the cramped panels we've previously seen him in. Of note here is that Coco and Tartah haven't *cured* his disability. That's not what they set out to do in the first place as that wasn't the problem that needed solving. What *did* need solving was the world's lack of means to let people like Coustas get around more easily. And, thanks to the creativity and ingenuity of young people, alongside the actual struggles they see a disabled person face, they do just that.



Figure 7: Coustas flies with his new cloak, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 45, Kamome Shirahama



Figure 8: Coustas' new legs, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 51, Kamome Shirahama

unnatural. The contrast here is interesting- both visuals symbolising freedom and malice are employed here by Kamome Shirahama, suggesting that Coustas' new legs exist in a realm between these two things. It isn't innovation and the use of magic to create aids for those with disabilities that's supposed to be framed as frightening here- it's *how* the body-altering, forbidden magic has been used that's meant to be. Yes, it grants him freedom, but has also permanently deformed his legs in a way that is likely irreversible. Additionally, the legs themselves can grow and twist at Coustas's behest, which he uses to harm his friends and as an outlet for the anger and frustration he feels towards them and his predicament. These legs grant Coustas mobility, but not as much mobility as Coco and Tartah's cloak did; they don't allow him to fly. That cloak also couldn't be used for violence like these new legs can, so in a way Coustas has actually advanced backwards thanks to these legs.

The triumph and victory that Coustas's story convey here both visually and narratively changes once he meets the brim-hatted witch that uses forbidden magic to alter his legs, however. Instead of rising up through the frame alongside Coco and Tartah, he now looms above them, shrouded in shadow and no longer bound to a cramped panel. His legs and entire body are again in view, which still signifies his freedom, but his legs are now made of gnarled, twisted wood embedded into his skin and bones. The imagery here is purposefully grotesque; magic that alters the human form is strictly forbidden, and what the brim-hatted witch did to Coustas' legs is

visually portrayed as being frightening and



Figure 9: Coustas attacks Tartah and Coco, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 51, Kamome Shirahama

This story arc raises an interesting moral question: should someone with the power to fix a problem fix it, even if they face punishment for doing so? It is one that weighs heavily on the young protagonist's mind, and sets her on the course of finding a way to circumvent the antiquated laws set in place by witches of the past for the betterment of mankind and in order to help those in need. It is easy to draw a comparison between magic's ultimate power being withheld from those who need it in *Witch Hat Atelier*, and life-saving medical attention being withheld from those with conditions and disabilities who need it in our world. In a study conducted by Gallup-West National Healthcare in 2019, it was found that 13.4% of American people answered yes to the question: *"Has there been a time in the last five years when a friend or family member passed away after not receiving treatment for their condition due to their inability to pay for it?"*¹⁶ additionally, openDemocracy.com has compiled a list of *"more than 250 people across 14 countries who have been arrested, charged or investigated under a range of laws over the last five years for supporting migrants."*¹⁷ Both of these statistics represent the withholding of potentially lifesaving help from people who have no say in their current circumstances, and raise similar moral questions as the one raised in *Witch Hat Atelier*.

Another perspective on magic and contraptions comes in the form of Sage Beldaruit, who is also a Sealchair user. Beldaruit is one of the Three Wise- three witches tasked with overseeing witch society in matters concerning laws, public relations and education. They are very powerful and highly respected, and as such have access to massive wealth and resources. Beldaruit cannot walk and is often bed-bound due to poor health, and relies on his Sealchair to get around. His Sealchair, unlike Coustas's, is large and regal, and has very little issue getting around, even being able to float. Its split hooves and general shape are reminiscent of a mountain goat or ram, which are known for their agility and climbing ability, whereas Coustas's chair more so resembled

¹⁶ Gallup, Inc. "Millions In U.S. Lost Someone Who Couldn't Afford Treatment". *Gallup.Com*, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/268094/millions-lost-someone-couldn-afford-treatment.aspx>.

¹⁷ "Hundreds Of Europeans 'Criminalised' For Helping Migrants". *Opendemocracy*, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/hundreds-of-europeans-criminalised-for-helping-migrants-new-data-shows-as-far-right-aims-to-win-big-in-european-elections/>.

a young horse, which are known for their general clumsiness and lack of mobility. Coustas's Sealchair is rigid and uncomfortable looking, whereas Beldaruit's is lavish and large, lined with furs and possessing large arched horns that act as arm rests, as well as a foot rest. The differences between these Sealchairs in terms of quality and comfort are noticeable. Coustas was given his Sealchair as an act of charity by the Knights Moralis, but clearly no major expenses were expended to get him one like Beldaruit's. Beldaruit, given his high standing as a Wise, can easily afford to have such an elaborate contraption. There is a clear disparity between these two characters in social status and wealth, and their Sealchairs highlight this. This compares directly to wheelchairs in the real world, and how accessible and high quality they may be depending on their price. Manual wheelchairs can cost between €150 and €500¹⁸, and while they are essential and effective tools for disabled people, they can be unwieldy and hard to control at times, as well as the fact that some people who require wheelchairs may not have use of their arms or the required muscle mass to propel them. Thus, electric wheelchairs are a more suitable choice for most, if not all, people who require these mobility aids, but they cost much more than manual ones. They can range between €2,500 and €3,800¹⁹, which is substantially more expensive. This means that, should someone live in a country where their health insurance doesn't cover the cost of their mobility aids, they may be forced to use an inferior form of it should their financial position not allow them to upgrade. Beldaruit and Coustas highlight the fact that money directly correlates with comfort and accessibility for disabled people, and that a lack of it leads to the opposite.

The story of the people of the ancient civilisation of Romonon also provides a parallel to both the world of *Witch Hat Atelier* and our own. In the story, the people of the city of Romonon magically forge their home out of gold, seeking to make it as perfect and opulent as possible. In order to keep people from outside of the city whom they consider to be less than perfect and thus unworthy to grace their city, the people built a gigantic snaking tunnel using magic to ward these outsiders off. The tunnel worked, and people whom had "nothing to offer" to the city were kept out, although now the greedy people of Romonon set their sights on those *inside* the city. Their value was

¹⁸ "Manual Wheelchairs". *Go Mobility*, 2022, <https://www.gomobility.ie/manual-wheelchairs/>.

¹⁹ "Powered Wheelchairs". *Go Mobility*, 2022, <https://www.gomobility.ie/powered-wheelchairs/>.

weighed on how much they could offer the city, and those deemed unworthy- the sick, the poor and the otherwise challenged- were turned into statues of gold and used to decorate the winding halls keeping people away from Romonon. This tale brings to mind the attack by Uematsu Satoshi, a former employee of a home for people with severe disabilities, in 2016 on 19 residents of that same facility in Sagami-hara, Japan. Prior to the attack, Uematsu had sent several letters to Japanese politicians, stating that *“My goal is a world in which the severely disabled can be euthanized, with their guardians’ consent, if they are unable to live at home and be active in society”*.²⁰, lending credence once again to the notion of a story being “called into being” and influenced by today’s society.

Qifrey tells this story as a cautionary tale to his apprentices about the potential dangers of magic, but it also serves as a tale describing the depths of human cruelty, and how disadvantaged and disabled people can be mistreated in terrible ways. Magic was the tool used by these people to conduct these terrible acts, but the true catalyst was their own biases and discrimination towards the people of their own city whom they saw as less than perfect

Overall, it is clear to see that magic in this series’ universe is indeed complex, and best described as a double-edged sword in how it may be used, with positive and negative aspects. While magic is often portrayed as an exclusively whimsical and joyful thing in media, *Witch Hat Atelier* uses it as an effective allegory for ableism and privilege, and weaves its existence into its narrative in more than just a cosmetic way. It is used as a way for characters and the narrative itself to express the importance of empathy, creativity and willingness to help those in need- it is a tool with infinite possibilities, some of which are outlawed for what is meant to be a noble cause and are barred from those who do not meet the financial and social statuses to benefit from them. In the eyes of the protagonist this ends up depriving disabled people of many ways to live more easily and comfortably, and is a point of contention and conflict throughout the story. Employing the use of visual and narrative shorthand through abstraction as previously discussed, manga can avoid all of these important talking points becoming

²⁰ "Satoshi Uematsu: Japanese Man Who Killed 19 Disabled People Sentenced To Death". *BBC News*, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51903289>.

obscured by swathes of unnecessary text or other content, which helps to 'trim the fat' so to speak, and retain clarity.

Chapter 3: Animal Allegory

Animals are an integral part of *Witch Hat Atelier's* world. Though they differ in appearance and anatomy to the animals of our own world, they are still recognisable due to them being combinations of actual animals- such as the scalewolf being a cross between a wolf and a lizard/dragon, and the myrphon being a penguin with four legs and rabbit ears. Their presence in the story is an important one. Not only do they feature heavily in the plot in many chapters, but they act as excellent vessels for allegory and metaphor- particularly in regard to the disabled characters.

For time immeasurable, humans have been drawn to animals in an artistic sense. Cave paintings depicting animals were found in the Chauvet Caves in France in 2001 dating back to approximately thirty thousand years ago, and humanity's fascination with observing and committing the creatures we so closely live alongside to canvas has only grown. This fascination stems from our ability to relate to animals on a psychological and personal level despite human being's evolutionary distance to them. Aristotle, in 'Aristotle's History of Animals' posits that *"...so in a number of animals we observe gentleness and fierceness, mildness or cross-temper, courage or timidity, fear or confidence, high spirits or low cunning, and, with regard to intelligence, something akin to sagacity. Some of these qualities in man, as compared with the corresponding qualities in animals, differ only quantitatively: that is to say, man has more or less of this quality, and an animal has more or less of some other; other qualities in man are represented by analogous and not identical qualities; for example, just as in man we find knowledge, wisdom and sagacity, so in certain animals there exists some other natural potentially akin to these."*²¹ For this reason, associating animals with people comes to humans easily. Just as C.S Lewis stated in a letter that the reason he portrayed Aslan, an expression of Jesus Christ, as a lion was *"the lion is supposed to be the king of beasts"*²², so too does Kamome Shirahama associate characters such as Euini with the guarded Scalewolf and Coustas with the scrappy and resourceful cat-crow hybrid. Similar to how fiction serves as an effective means to deliver messages about the real world,

²¹ Aristotle, *The History Of Animals, 350 BCE, translated by D'arcy Wentworth Thompson*

²² Today, Christian. "C S Lewis Letter Testifies Narnia'S Lion As Christ". *Christiantoday.Com*, 2005, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/c.s.lewis.letter.testifies.narnia.lion.as.christ/4724.htm>.

animals also serve as an effective means to sum up a character by their most prominent behaviours and personality traits. While historically, animals have been used before as derogatory imagery when talking about marginalised people such as those with disabilities, this is far from the case in *Witch Hat Atelier*, and the comparisons exist as a multi layered and interesting narrative device as opposed to weapons of derision and hatred.



Figure 10: Eunie, *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 19, Kamome Shirahama

One such example of a disabled character being associated with an animal is Eunie, a young neurodivergent boy whom meets Coco and the other witches of Qifrey's atelier when he arrives at the site of their second trial that they all must pass in order to advance as witches. Eunie is a very anxious and self-criticising boy, constantly folding under his teacher Kukrow's stern and cruel gaze. He internalizes the insults which Kukrow directs at him, the most common of which being that he's incapable of passing this trial as he's failed several times before, and that he is useless as a result of it. Eunie frequently gives in to his own fear of being criticised and watched constantly. From his first appearance, we see that his eyes are 'hidden' behind his hair, and that he frequently fidgets and mumbles to himself as a way to soothe himself and as a response to anxiety inducing situations. He rarely appears front and centre in panels, instead being obscured by other characters or even the text bubbles, which represents his deep fear of being the centre of attention and subject of criticism.

As a part of the trial the apprentices will be facing, they must wear cloaks made of the hide of the Scalewolf, which is lined with their Plaitscale. At the beginning of this chapter, Agott refers to the scales on the wolves as "armour" as she watches them pass by the atelier. These cloaks make the user appear as something else, and due to the nature of the trial the apprentices must stay disguised as animals using the cloaks.

Over the course of the trial, Richeh and the other witches help Euini gain confidence in himself and in his abilities, but that doesn't completely erase his debilitating anxiety. The problem for Euini is that he is deeply, profoundly afraid of being watched as he casts magic, as his teacher constantly does so and criticises him heavily. It is only when, in a moment of heightened anxiety, that Euini decides to trust his own magic ability and embrace the fact he prefers to be hidden rather than try to suppress it, that he finds a solution; he alters the glyphs on the cloak to make it hide him entirely. This provides him with a safe and comfortable way to cast spells, which immediately helps alleviate his anxiety. For the first time, we see his eyes, which symbolises his growth and steps towards acceptance- now that he has the modified Scalewolf cloak as an aid, he no longer needs to hide behind his hair.



Figure 11: Euini's new cloak, Witch Hat Atelier, Chapter 21, Kamome Shirahama

The cloak retains the Scalewolf scales even after Euini modifies it, signifying their importance, and suggesting that the cloak acts as 'armour' for Euini, just as the scales do for the Scalewolf. He uses this newfound cloak to save the other witches later on from an attack by an evil Brimhat Witch, but is eventually overpowered and turned into a Scalewolf against his will using forbidden magic tattooed into his skin. Coco is able to use her magic to make a glyph to press over the one on his body, which allows Euini to control the transformation and retain his consciousness.

In the final moments before Euini flees with Alaira in order to find a way to reverse the forbidden magic, we see him dashing across the page confidently just like the

scalewolves at the beginning of the arc as he sheds his scales, something Scalewolves only do in order not to hurt their loved ones with their sharp edges. He embraces then embraces Richeh, having finally found kinship with someone who truly understands and supports him for who he is, stating *“I’d always wanted to be someone else, but now all I want is to be me again”*



Figure 12: Richeh embraces Euini, Witch Hat Atelier, Chapter 29, Kamome Shirahama

Throughout this arc, Euini’s inner strength is represented by the Scalewolf, as it’s hide acts as an aid for his disability. After realising that he is a worthy witch and that his disability does not make him lesser or useless, he is eager to return to himself once he is transformed into a Scalewolf, displaying that he has fully accepted and embraced himself, perceived flaws and all. The Scalewolf being a symbol in this regard perpetuates the idea that signs and symbols in manga can prove to be efficient and succinct ways to present ideas on an otherwise very broad subject area.

Euini’s story of learning to live with his disability is made even more effective by incorporating comparisons to an animal in it, as a concise and subtle way to amplify the existing narrative. This story of empowerment and acceptance of one’s disability could not have been told as well without the comparisons, in fact, and it serves as a strong- and most importantly, kind- narrative device.

Chapter 4: A Cure Versus an Aid

Yoshiko Okuyama, when discussing Foucault's body of work, said "*Their abnormalities were considered conditions that needed to be fixed, an idea that contributed to today's medical model of disability. In other words, if medically possible, a disability was seen as something that needed to be "cured" or "restored." This idea of restoration to perfect health is a constant theme embedded in our contemporary media outlets, including comics and films*"²³ This trend in the representation of disabled people in media is all too common and comes with many negative effects, given media's potential to influence how people see the groups it represents. The idea that disabilities must be cured in order for the people possessing them to be of any worth or value is a toxic one rooted in ableism. Even if a piece of media contains representation of a disabled person, if their disability is treated as something to be rid of or overcome, then it is not worthwhile representation. Not only can this stance be understood as the creator expressing their belief that disabilities can and should be erased, but it can also suggest that those who do somehow 'overcome' them are stronger and more admirable than those living with them. Additionally, the overcoming of a disability is sometimes used to 'inspire' the audience in what has been called "inspiration porn" - "*The term "inspiration porn" was coined by Stella Young, an Australian disability activist. Her claim is that people with disabilities are not there to "inspire" the abled-bodied.*"²⁴ All of these negative portrayals serve to do nothing but further oppress disabled people in media which in many cases will have a knock-on effect and leak into people's real-life perceptions of the disabled population.

When looking at the various representations of disabled characters in *Witch Hat Atelier*, it is plain to see that no such toxic tropes are employed by the author, particularly during the character Tartah's story.

Tartah is a young boy who runs a shop selling magic supplies and ingredients alongside his grandfather. He suffers from a degenerative condition known as Silverwash (this world's equivalent to colour-blindness), which bathes everything he sees in silver and prevents him from seeing in colour. This is a source of strife for him, as being a witch means relying on one's eyesight, something which he is constantly reminded of by the witches around him. As much as he wants to become a full-fledged witch, his disability prevents him from doing so, a fact to which he is resigned. A change of perspective comes, however, when he must help Coco by fetching her some medicine when she runs a fever. The hospital which the two characters are in relies on colour to distinguish between the herbs and not labels as Tartah would hope. Tartah breaks

²³ Okuyama, Yoshiko. *Reframing Disability In Manga*. University Of Hawai'i Press, 2020.

²⁴ Okuyama, Yoshiko. *Reframing Disability In Manga*. University Of Hawai'i Press, 2020.

down, cursing his condition and lamenting the fact he cannot help his friend in her time of need.



Figure 13: Tartah doubting himself; *Witch Hat Atelier*, Chapter 16, Kamome Shirahama

Coco then helps Tartah come up with a spell that reduces the medicines down to their ingredients- something which Tartah can recognise by shape as he organises and sells them in his shop. For the first time, Tartah has a way around his Silverwash that isn't an outright cure. He helps Coco, and in helping her helps himself by realising that finding a cure isn't the answer, but finding useful accommodations and workarounds for it is.

By taking this stance, Kamome Shirahama steers *Witch Hat Atelier's* narrative in a positive and uplifting direction in regards to disability, actively opposing the stances taken in other pieces of media and in history which suggest disability is something that needs to be cured or erased, and it "doesn't fall into the fantasy-genre trap of trying to use magic to "fix" its characters' differences."²⁵

²⁵ "Thinking Outside The Circle: Accessibility And Education In *Witch Hat Atelier* - Anime Feminist". *Anime Feminist*, 2020, <https://www.animefeminist.com/thinking-outside-the-circle-accessibility-and-education-in-witch-hat-atelier/>.

Conclusion

Witch Hat Atelier's treatment of its disabled characters- and the very fact that disabled characters exist in its story- speaks to an era of positive change in manga in how it handles disability. Manga has huge potential for starting conversations that need to be had and delivering messages thanks to its universal appeal as a visual medium, which makes it the perfect way for Kamome Shirahama to tell a story which fosters empathy, kindness and critical thought of our society in matters of disability. The author's use of abstraction and metaphors in both its characters and world when getting points across add to the story's efficacy, and overall make it a prime example of how disability should be treated in media. Manga, being as widespread in its reach and popularity as evidenced by global sales and market value, also makes it an excellent platform to enact social change through conversation and representation.

Fiction serves as a means to question fact in a concise and challenging way, and *Witch Hat Atelier* exists as a prime example of this. By creating a world that is foundationally based on our own and adding aspects such as magic, it sets up a narrative environment in which many extremely valuable and timely conversations about how our real life society treats disabled people, and offers suggestions for how we may change negative aspects of this world through the exploits of its protagonist and characters.

Overall, *Witch Hat Atelier* acts as promising insight into the future of the positive representation of disability in manga, and will hopefully usher in a period of kindness, acceptance and education within its readers and within the medium as a whole.

*"The definitions of disability have changed throughout history and will continue to evolve in the future. Comics' portrayal of disability is following the same path. While US comics and Japan's manga continue to present inaccurate and stereotypical descriptions of disabled people, a minority of high-quality comic titles have been published to a receptive audience."*²⁶

²⁶ Okuyama, Yoshiko. *Reframing Disability In Manga*. University Of Hawai'i Press, 2020.

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