



Resource sheet

18th and 19th centuries.

Section of the module/ D

1/ Theme:

Through French literature, we find the place of disability in society.

18th century:

Denis Diderot : Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can see 1749

Letter on the Deaf and Dumb, for the Use of those who hear and speak 1751

19th century:

Victor Hugo : The Hunchback of Notre-Dame 1831

Honoré de Balzac : Cousin Bette 1846

George Sand : The Miller of Angibault 1845

The Bagpipers 1853

Eugène Sue : The Mysteries of Paris 1842

Jules Verne : Michael Strogoff: The Courier of the Czar 1876

2/ Context:

In the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment was born in France and with it, a new philosophical thought bringing new ideas about society. This is the time of writing the Encyclopedia guided by a questioning of knowledge. Handicap does not have a large place but it is evoked in two types of writings: fables and a speech of Diderot.

Thus, other fabulists have considered disability as an attribute and have “elevated” disability to the rank of a character in the same way as animals such as Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian in The Blind and the Paralytic or Arnaud Berquin in The Blind and the Lame. This is, ultimately, giving him a place of honor at that time. Indeed, like animals, disabled person is thus endowed with defects (reduced to his disability) and qualities (mainly that of thinking of developing a solution). In these two fables we find the idea of compensation, that if several disabled people cooperate, they could become an ideal and complete person. There is the idea that the handicapped is a piece of puzzle who, if he finds another piece to associate with, could finally be a person like the others. So the Paralytic could guide the Blind who would allow him to move by carrying it. It should be noted that Arnaud Berquin cared about education of children and published different tales.

The 18th century is also a reconsideration of the science of the Middle Ages and advances in the field of surgery. This is how blind people are operated to restore their sight. Diderot, in an essay on visual perception, adopts a new vision of blind at the opposite of their image in society. He explains that this changes the benchmarks of the individual who must then readjust to the environment around him. He describes how blind people apprehend the space around them by touch; he emphasizes that human being is capable of adaptation according to what he is, that the loss of one of the senses is not synonymous with debility. He thus demonstrates that the same goes for morality, which cannot be universal since everyone is different: he thus attacks religion; that's worth to him to be imprisoned. However, by his ideas, he changes the view of the society about blind; he shows that these people are to be taken into account through their difference. He reiterated this kind of essay in 1721 with the Letter on the Deaf and Dumb for the Use of those who hear and speak.

So we go a step further by writing that disabled person is sensitive and thoughtful; but it is always suggested that he is an imaginary character. Meanwhile, the idea that disability can be healed is emerging; if it is still innate, it is no longer a definitive trait.

3/ Objectives:

This sheet is attached to the training module of the history of disability and its legislative framework.

4/ Limits:

We have studied only the case of France.