

**Submitted for comprehensive examination in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of PhD in Critical Disability Studies at York University**

**The Role of Literature in the Context of Disability**

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### *The Role of Literature in the Context of Disability*

Writing this paper I was hesitant about whether to approach this topic as a comprehensive overview of available materials or through a critical assessment of those resources. Based on the critical nature of this discipline, I determined that the most valuable approach was to go beyond the literature and engage materials in an evaluative process based on impact and ability to address disability and disability issues. Disability is seen as occupying an invisible place in the study of literature: it is present but unaddressed. It is this invisibility which pushed me to take a position in this paper upholding the direction of disability studies literature calling into question traditional methods of reading and understanding disability in literature.

Noting the prevalence of disability in fiction this paper firstly outlines the role of literature as it relates to disability within the wider social context, reviewing the power of this force to influence and to reflect societal beliefs and values. The widespread characterization of people with disabilities in fiction is demonstrated to hold influence on real life understandings of this group. Secondly, the historic existence of disability in literature is discussed in terms of its ubiquity from the Greek tragedy to contemporary writings. Demonstrating this history through selected depictions of disability displays the ways in which literary presentations reflect the social and historical times in which they were produced. The third section outlines traditional literary theory and criticism. I have taken the position that this is not a productive line of inquiry in the analysis of disability within a social context, given its limited scope. Emerging contextually based approaches however, are argued to provide more valuable insights leading to culturally based analyses reflective of the of the sociology of literature, an area which can be built upon by disability studies perspectives. Based on this understanding and the developing area of cultural disability studies, the final sections of this paper summarize the major contributions and observations brought forth to date regarding the role of literature in the study of disability. Previous examinations of stereotype, metaphor and classification

systems are discussed as the building blocks upon which contemporary socially based inquiry is evolving. Literary analysis in this vein is expanding to address areas of diversity, meaning and power shaping future directions for the study of literature within a disability framework.

### **Why Study Literature**

Literature plays a powerful role in society purporting truths and values, reflective of the time in which it was created (Eagleton, 1983). This form of art and entertainment rests outside of doctrines of overt force, more discretely providing society with collective images, symbols, habits and rituals (Eagleton, 1983). Literature is particularly important and influential as a cultural force because of its commonplace presentation. Lacking the sensationalism of other media formats this type of text provides more fully developed (Barnes, 1997) and readily accepted versions of reality.

Fiction holds an important place in the communication of values and ideas and in the sharing of common culture and unspoken tradition (McCollum, 1998). McCollum argues that story, lore, myth, legends, jokes, and proverb act as cultural authorities passing on moral lessons, values, and understandings of right and wrong, and good and bad in a less filtered manner than provided by other historical mediums. With this ability to influence, literature becomes a powerful force, constitutive of social reality. Though the extent of its strength has been questioned (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001), Rockwell (1977) challenges those who diminish the power of literature to influence social behavior in the lived world, pointing out that in spite of our acceptance of literature as fictitious, it's pervasive effects are exposed through the universal existence of censorship by policy makers and rulers.

To grasp a culture's understanding of disability, the ideology and values of that society need to be investigated (Eisenland & Sailors, 1998). Presentations of disability in literature commonly

depict disability as one-dimensional, dehumanizing and stereotypical. This kind of presentation is demonstrative of the power of cultural representations through literature to reflect and to shape societal understandings. These cultural illustrations

...form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life. (Barnes, 1992, 39)

Disability within literature is ubiquitous across cultures and time (Shakespeare, 1997). It is often presented in rigidly typed cultural roles and is symbolic of larger social issues, used as a literary tool and ignored in the wider study of literature. Linton (1998) observes that in the humanities, “disability imagery abounds in the materials considered and produced...and yet because it is not analyzed, it remains as background, seemingly of little consequence” (110). This dearth of analysis in traditional academic disciplines, reflective of attitudes in its paucity, has prompted disability scholars to study the role of literature as a social phenomenon; as an archive of untold histories (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001) a source of imagery, stereotypes and symbols (Biklen & Bogden, 1977, Gartner, 1987, Kriegl, 1987, Longmore, 1987, Norden, 1994) a record of attitudes and reactions towards disability (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001), as a means of imposing standards of normality, conformity and productivity (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, Davis, 1995, Keith, 2001, Truchan-Tataryn, 2007), as a gendered issue (Fine & Ash, 1988, Kent, 1987, Morris, 1991) and as a contributing element of social and cultural identity (Hefferty & Foster, 1994, Mitchell & Snyder, 2002, Thomson, 1997a, 1997b).

Prince (2006) states that “What people believe about individuals with disabilities underlies the treatment of these individuals in all aspects of their lives.” and that “The cost of negative beliefs or inaccurate information is high, both for people with disabilities and for society as a whole.” (20). If literature, as Mitchell & Snyder (2006) suggest, has the power to both uphold and confront the

“cultural truisms” which develop from fiction into distorted misconceptions in reality (Kriegl, 1987) the realization and exploration of literature as a cultural force is imperative to the study of disability. The ineffective position of traditional literary studies as a source of social observation needs to be reassessed and the analysis of disability in fiction brought forth as an increasingly significant ground for interpretation as both a structural and cultural force.

### **The Historic Role of Disability in Fiction**

Though historically disability has been widely reported as absent (Baynton, 2001, Mitchell & Snyder, 2006) outside of the purview of critical analysis (Couser, 2006) its portrayal has been pervasive throughout literature (Darke, 1998). Through the widespread characterization of various forms of disability and disabled characters, literature from both the past and present provides disability researchers and advocates with important information. There are abundant examples of characters with physical, cognitive, psychiatric and sensory impairments in literary portrayals, the most often cited being William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Dickens’ *Tiny Tim*, and Melville’s *Captain Ahab*. Tom Shakespeare (1997) identifies epilepsy, restricted growth, sensory impairments, *crippling* conditions and leprosy as commonly used fictional traits. Other authors break down these molds further into precise roles such as the Vengeful or Disagreeable Dwarf (Adelson, 2005) or the Demonic or Charity Cripple (Kriegl, 1987).

#### ***Historical Presentations***

In ancient tragedy, Sophocles’ Oedipus, meaning swollen or clubbed foot, is one of the oldest examples of disability in literature. Stiker’s (1997) *A History of Disability* provides additional examples of figures in classic stories with physical aberrations, Hephaestus, with an unidentified disability, expelled at birth and Philoctetes, the son of a king who has his foot bitten off by a serpent.

In Norse mythology, Stiker cites Tyr, the god of combat and heroic glory who has one hand, and Odin, the central god of Norse paganism, who has one eye.

The middle ages reflect a variety of attitudes towards disability. Impairment is viewed through a range of lenses from punishments for evil and sin to a gift of the gods, and later as the object of Christian charity (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, Stiker, 1997). Literary presentations reflect this history. That many of the characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* possess a disease or some kind of physical difference (the Wife of Bath, the Summoner and the Cook) demonstrates the prevalence of this kind of diversity (Andrew, 1991). At the height of the Middle Ages the role of charity increased (Stiker, 1997) as typified by the prolific poetry of Francis of Assisi which upheld that assistance for the poor was noble. The view that disability was demonic or sinful also typical of this era, is illustrated in the classic epic poem *Beowulf*, through the depiction of the antagonist, Grendel. Though Grendel is never described in relation to his own physical form, he is depicted as an "unhappy creature" from whom "...sprang all bad breeds, trolls and elves and monsters, likewise the giants..." (as cited in Norton Anthology of Literature, 1968, 9).

The beginnings of modernity brought the recognition of medicalization, contamination (Stiker, 1997) and hospitalization (Trent, 1994). Reflecting the Enlightenment and thinkers such as John Locke, personal characteristics of rationality, consciousness, and self-consciousness became valued. Classic literature of this time period reflects an emphasis on order and the harmful effects of leaving the *irrational* or *disordered*, to their own devices. Shakespeare's *Richard III*, widely cited in the disability literature as a stereotype, describes himself as an "ugly hunchback", and is portrayed as evil, scheming, jealous and murderous. In de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605 & 1615) the protagonist Alonso Quixano, is infatuated with books and thought to be delusional because of his lack of sleep and constant reading. Both characters demonstrate a lack of rationality and inability to interact with

society in a standard manner. They are situated outside of Locke's categorizations of personhood and are deemed detrimental to themselves.

The rise of modernity and the progression of the industrial revolution, saw the Romantic fashion of fiction as escapism (Eagleton, 1983) in which novelists such as Dickens present characters with disabilities like the sweet, innocent Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) as both the result of and the antithesis of brutality of industrialized life. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries brought widespread segregation and institutionalization, leading towards the development of Social Darwinism, a focus on progress and notions of human superiority (Malhotra, 2001). In *Jane Eyre* (1847) Brontë adheres to this socially created belief in the *mad* Bertha, who "...came from a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations." (754-755) and who for the protection of herself and others is kept secret and locked in a tower. This need for protection from the dangers of *violent, mad, exotic* women is later justified when she burns down the house, killing herself and blinding her husband. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1949) Faulkner promotes this idea of division based on disability and danger having Benjy Compson, who has an intellectual disability, castrated after approaching a girl when he is left unsupervised.

The presence of disability is not restricted to adult literature but also appears frequently in children's books such as in *The Secret Garden* (1911) and *Little Women* (1880), in fairy tales and nursery rhymes and stories like *Three Blind Mice* or *Simple Simon* (Franks, 2001).

The continued presence of disabled characters in contemporary literature is demonstrated by Andelson (2005) who reviews the role of characters with dwarfism and shows a greater proportional abundance of characters with this condition in fiction than in actuality. The author cites nineteen novels written within the past four decades alone, with what she considers realistic portrayals including John Irving's (1981) *The Hotel New Hampshire* and Ursula Hegi's (1994) *Stones from the*

*River*. In my preparation for this research, (which consisted of a survey of popular contemporary novels without pre-determined disability criteria, and included books from Oprah's Book Club, Heather's Picks, Canada Reads and the New York Times Best Sellers List), I discovered the same vast presence of disability in fiction. In the more than fifty novels that I read, I encountered only one with no mention of a character with a disability in either a background or central role. What surprised me in addition to this omnipresence was my inability to recall many characters with disabilities in what I had read previously. My own experience demonstrates the invisibility described by Mitchell & Snyder (2006). Snyder, Brueggemann and Thomson (2002) suggest that disability in literature is a ubiquitous, unspoken subject which maintains an absolute state of otherness. Disability is not absent in its portrayal as other minority groups have been in the past, but it is silenced and left without address (Truchan-Tataryn, 2007). Challenges to traditional assumptions about disability and or the stock roles portrayed by characters with them are rare in mainstream literature and the established academic study of this field has been of little assistance in the consideration of the role of disability in fiction.

### **Literary Theory & Criticism**

Reviewing traditional approaches to literary theory and criticism, the types of analysis used are outlined allowing for an examination of what has been considered worthy of study in this discipline and the reasons for the types of examination customarily used. This background lays the groundwork for the application of a disability studies framework and the introduction of alternative theory, more relevant to a social and cultural investigation. The insular nature of this discipline, both within texts themselves, and based on the frequent confinement of literary studies to the single canon of *serious* fiction (Radway, 1989) demonstrate the limitations of classical literary study, and the necessity for a socially based inquiry directed at the role of disability within this realm. Linton



(1998) argues that the humanities and the arts ignore disability as a field of inquiry, and hierarchically distinguish between theoretical and applied fields of study. Disability, she argues, is classed within the less valued grouping of practical education and is often left to be studied in areas considered less academically rigorous such as social work. Despite the abundant representation of disability found in literature, as demonstrated in the previous section, little analysis is available outside of the observance of disability as a thematic or metaphoric device. *The Dictionary of Literary Themes/Motifs* (1988) for example, provides no reference for the term disability or handicap, but contains entries for the terms *simple* and *fool*. *Simple* as a theme or motif is described as “a displaced person, who cares for others, receives pay of abundant grace” and *fool* describes the “lowest classes...denuded of what we take to be the necessities of Western human life”. This kind of interpretation demonstrates the vast distance in the focus of the study of literature and the study of disability.

Schools of literary criticism are divided by Klarer (2004) into Text Oriented, Author Oriented, Reader Oriented and Context Oriented approaches. The first three offer more traditional approaches while the last presents a more challenging and productive method to literary criticism. These schools of criticism are briefly outlined below.

### ***Text Oriented Approaches***

Text oriented approaches are concerned with the analysis of language, style and structure. The major areas of theory under this category are: Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, Semiotics, Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction. Formalism analyzes the intrinsic features of text, apart from outside influence (Eagleton, 1983, Klarer, 2004) and text as an entity in its own right (Habib, 2008). New Criticism seeks a positivistic approach to the study text itself rather than the ways in which text is created, (Eagleton, 1983m Habib, 2008). Structuralism is concerned with the

laws that govern the structure of text and the meaning of objects within that text without moving outside of it (Eagleton, 1983, McGowan, 2006). Semiotics based on the work of Saussure, explores the bond between the signifier and the signified, (d-o-g, and how that comes to mean dog). It studies signs and the ways in which they are interpreted in a cultural context (Beckson & Ganz, 1994) arguing that nothing exists beyond text (Klarer, 2004, McGowan, 2006). Post Structuralism challenges narrative as a stable entity and assumes the reader as the producer of meaning, but also considers text to hold meaning only within its own self-contained entity (Eagleton, 1983). Barthes identified text as holding a role in culture, but from the outside in, inviting participants into the text, rather than the text to the outside world (Habib, 2008). Deconstruction, associated especially with Derrida uses close reading to analyze small passages in great detail, with concern for words, syntax, order and internal contradictions (Benjamin, 2006), and also studies the development of signifiers.

This type of text based analysis is pre-occupied with language, structure and internal analysis but does not look at literature in terms of social practice, influence or historic setting. The works of fiction studied are reduced to the study of a single element within the larger construction. Text based approaches can offer little to a disability analysis based on a social understandings of disability in relation to the creation or maintenance of an oppressive society.

### ***Author Oriented Approaches***

Approaches used under this category focus on the connection between the author and the text. At first glance this seems to offer greater insight, however, author oriented approaches are as restricted to the bound pages of a book as text oriented approaches and offer little criticism of the society in which they were produced.

Psycho-analytic criticism based the works of Freud is problematic in a disability studies realm based on the linkage with psychiatry. Authors such as Oliver (1990) clearly reject psychologically based explanations of disability based on the failure of this kind of approach to address disability outside of an individualistic lens (cited in Shakespeare, 1997). This method focuses on the interaction between reader and text (Lapsley, 2006) and claims a more fruitful analysis when text is looked at as an expression of the author's psyche (Beckson & Ganz, 1994). Though this approach can be used to call attention to the author's construction it is also viewed as speculative, and often as a reductive search for phallic symbols (Eagleton, 1983). Phenomenology, based on the work of Husserl, is a widely used approach in the disability field and provides information about personal experience. This focus on immediate experience and subjectivity are deemed as determinative of meaning (Eagleton, 1983, Habib, 2008). Used within the context of literary criticism, this tool once again fails to address meaning outside of the text focusing only on the book itself and the experiences within it. "The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author's consciousness" (59) ignoring historical context, author conditions of production and readership (Eagleton, 1983).

### ***Reader Oriented Approaches***

Reader oriented approaches include Reception Theory and Reader Response Theory and focus on the relationship of text to reader. This kind of study seems to offer promise and challenges traditional text oriented approaches, viewing the reader as participating in the creation of meaning (Belsey, 2006) through pre-understandings, and beliefs (Klarer, 2004). Eagleton (1983) however, delves further into the analysis of reader responses and shows that this type of work focuses on specific codes of meaning that are only applicable to those who have what are considered liberal beliefs and who have access to *appropriate* literary criticism tools. Reader's responses are based on

coding which requires internal consistency allowing meaning to be brought only through a selected and limited manner of interpretation.

### *Context Oriented Approaches*

Context oriented approaches are increasingly used and bring potential to the analysis of literature in the larger social and historical context (Klarer, 2004). This type of approach assesses factors outside of the text and offers ways in which to address literature within in the framework of disability. Context based approaches Klarer (2004) include Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, and Cultural Studies. Marxist analysis, outlines social and political factors as well as the material conditions under which text is produced, and the forces behind this artistic production (Daly, 2006, Habib, 2008). Feminist analysis draws on rights and politics and the denial of voice based on sex and gender. New Historicism views literature as part of the larger social make-up and history as an interpretation rather than a fact. Based on Foucauldian notions of knowledge and power, literature is regarded as a collection of cultural discourses. Cultural studies, closely linked to New Historicism, addresses literature as a location of cultural struggle (Habib, 2008). Based out of the works of Raymond Williams, literature is assessed as part of the process of cultural production, rather than as a series of isolated details (1968). Cultural studies questions grand narratives and recognizes the complexity of reality and lived experience (Habib, 2008).

Eagleton (1983) argues that politics are an inherent part of literary theory and that conventional methods of analysis are stuck within their own ideological frameworks. Literary criticism, he notes, has rarely challenged the status quo and has instead worked to maintain power structures and to reflect attitudes of subordination, hierarchy and individualism. To move beyond this limiting scope literary theory needs to be analyzed as an object of knowledge and inherently linked to

wider society, to readers and to writers. Bérubé (1997) suggests that information gleaned from the cultural presentations of disability is reflective of understandings of disability, attitudes towards social policy, resource allocation and rights. The pervasive negative, fragmented and charitable presentation of disability in literature must therefore be addressed within this cultural framework as a social phenomenon, rather than continuing to use text, author, or reader based analysis which fail to move beyond the text itself.

### **Moving to a Cultural Analysis**

Culture has been described at its base as a way of life (Giddens, as cited by Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Raymond Williams explained culture in terms of signifying systems and values which are “communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (as cited in Barnes & Mercer, 2010, 290). Williams recognized the link between literature/art and perceptions of social reality (Laurenson, 1978) and thus invented a new realm of cultural and literary criticism (Higgins, 2001). To study culture is to recognize the role of the normal and the abnormal and to analyze the socialization that takes place as part of social constructions, assumptions and rules (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Williams (1980) argued that culture and the creation of art rests in materialism and exists within the context in which it is produced and consumed. It is created within the confines of a specific era, by authors who are part of a specific class and gender and are subject to social influence (Laurenson, 1978).

### ***Sociology of Literature***

Noting the usefulness of a cultural approach to literary study such as that provided by Williams, the sociology of literature demonstrates a theoretical base from which to advance the study of disability and literature. This area of study provides an avenue of inquiry favorable to the study of

culture and the analysis of implications of disability in literary representation. Sociology of literature is the study of society through its writings based on the understanding that literature and society explain one another (Desan, Parkhurst Ferguson & Griswold, 1989). Outside of the confines of a single theoretical framework, this field highlights diversity, multiple social realities, and the relationship of literature to the rest of society (Desan et al., 1989, Rockwell, 1977, Wolff, 1977). This model looks at literature based on assumptions and socialization and attempts to avoid the mono-causal explanations of traditional literary analysis (Higgins, 2001). Often using a Marxist approach, the field seeks to understand ideology (Laurenson, 1978) and to interpret social process (Desan et al., 1989). Routh & Wolff (1977) have described the investigation of the relationship between literature and society as existing in five distinctive ways: *Sociologically Aware Study*, focusing on the literature itself as a product of the conditions in which it was produced and the materials of literary scholars as socially and historically created. *Literature as a Kind of Sociology* identifying writings as a source of data that would otherwise be unavailable to researchers. The *Social Genesis of Literature* which sees the creation and production of art in a society as well as its constraints. *Literature as Social Product and Force*, which identifies writing as production and as a force in social development but also capable of political education and social transformation and *The Way in which Literature may affect Society and effect Social Change*, points to the power of literature to both oppress and to challenge. Each of these methods of using literature as source of information about society has the capacity to reflect and to add to disability studies approaches to the study of literature.

Barnes & Mercer (2010) note that culture maintains a role in both the emancipation and the domination of people with disabilities. Bringing forth a culturally based analysis, which recognizes this power offers a more complex breakdown of traditional able-bodied narratives. The recognition of such an approach underscores the power of fiction to influence and reflect reality highlighting the

important observation that much of the information about disability held by the public comes from secondary sources (Zola, 1987). Literature is powerful because it is imitative of reality (Thomson, 1997a). People learn from other people whether real or imaginary. Readers spend hours with characters and settings, moving between fiction and reality in their own lives. The characters we read about and their stories become part of what we know. The application of sociological frames of inquiry adds to the ways in which literature can be understood as part of cultural knowledge. As Poore (2002) has remarked “If we think that cultural representations are a significant factor in shaping perceptions of reality, it is central to our liberatory project to find or create images of disability that either show people with disabilities as ordinary or conceive of disability in entirely new, avant-garde ways” (262).

### **Approaches to Literature in Disability Studies**

The study of disability related to cultural portrayals has been addressed through numerous processes and divided into as many categories based on factors such as ideology, otherness, anomaly and liminality(*sic*)(Shakespeare, 1997) imagery, media formats, gendered and cultural analyses (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Outlining the major contributions of disability scholars to the analysis of literature the following section summarizes the movement and contributions in this area progressing towards the cultural disability studies of the last decades.

The use of disability as stereotype or metaphor has been widely discussed in early disability literature. Of the conventional presentations identified by major contributors in this area, Longmore (1987) cites three common stereotypes including disability as punishment for evil, embitterment about their fate, and the assumption that people with disabilities would destroy the non-disabled if

given the opportunity. Other research shows people with disabilities as spectacles, as pitiable and pathetic, good people who have been sinned against, as vengeful, disagreeable, sinister and evil, as super-crip, comic mis-adventurer or object of ridicule, as their own worst enemy, the sweet innocent, as a burden, non-sexual or over sexed and threatening or incapable of participation (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, Biklen & Bogdan, 1977, Gartner, 1982, Keith, 2001, Kent, 2001, Kriegl, 1987, Longmore, 1987, McCollum, 1998, Norden, 1994, Safran, 1998). These commonly identified stereotypes emphasize a single feature while ignoring the totality of the characters (Thomson, 1997a). In their failure to offer challenges to stigmas or stereotypes, Thomson (1997a) holds that literary metaphors “flatten” the experiences of real people. This one-dimensional presentation and a lack of respect for realism and the complexity of lived disability experience are plentiful in contemporary novels. Two recent works of fiction exemplifying this are Sara Gruen’s (2006) New York Times Best Seller, *Water for Elephants*, and the most recent pick for Oprah’s Book Club, David Wroblewski’s (2008) *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. Gruen tells the story of a travelling circus during the depression in the United States. One of the characters, August, is sometimes charming but has an evil and abusive side and harms his wife, his staff and the animals that he trains. His violent temper and mood swings are attributed to schizophrenia. He is eventually killed by Rosie, an elephant he has mistreated on a regular basis, and his death is illustrated as poetic justice. In her typecasting of this psychiatric disability the author fails to present an accurate portrayal of a person with schizophrenia. In the author’s note following the novel, Gruen spends several pages reviewing the research she conducted for this book to understand the functioning of a 1920’s travelling circus. She cites having taken three research trips to study elephant training, body language and behavior to acquire the “knowledge necessary to do justice to the subject” (333). Though she briefly mentions the “horrific and very real tragedy of Jamaican ginger paralysis” (334) featured as a side story of disability in the book, she provides no information concerning background research or explanation



for her portrayal of schizophrenia. Elephants are accorded a level of respect worthy of accurate portrayal, while a human being's disability is shown in an erroneous and stereotypical fashion.

Wroblewski, in a similar manner, tells the story of a boy who raises a fictional breed of dogs. Edgar, the novel's protagonist is depicted as "mute" but "hearing". In his acknowledgements the author identifies the contributions of a speech pathologist with regard to the presentation of Edgar's disability, but again focuses a great deal more attention on the accuracy of the fictional dog breeding and training described throughout the story. Wroblewski recognizes contributions from purveyors of veterinary care, canine biology, and dog training. The importance of a true-to-life presentation of disability is far outweighed by that of the dogs and their training methods. This lack of attention to the veracity of disability imagery, especially when such care is taken to correctly depict animals, correctly reflects the degree with which Morris' (1991) sentiment that self image "dominated by the non-disabled world's reaction to us" (28) is troublesome. This devaluation of disability through its presentation supports Truchan-Tataryn's (2007) claim that literature holds up a general ambivalence towards disability.

The use of disability as metaphor, under this same pretense, is identified by Thomson (1997a) as public slander and represents themes of isolation, defeat (1997a) deception, innocence, crisis (McCollum, 1998), loneliness, unreciprocated love (Krumland, 2008) punishment, sin, and the wrath of God (Keith, 2001). The rendering of these metaphors occurs regularly. Symbolic images are used to represent social conflict and pain and as a segue into stories of social justice (Mitchell & Snyder, 1997). Atwood, for example, cites disability in general as a metaphor for the Canadian struggle for survival (1972). Keith (2001) describes the role of characters with disabilities in youth fiction as serving as a pathway to social good for non-disabled characters. Those she terms second fiddle characters, people with disabilities, are viewed as ways for non-disabled people to make contributions to society in some form of charity or social responsibility. A final example is provided

by Keith (2004) in her review of Trueman's (2000) young adult novel *Stuck in Neutral* which describes the life of Shawn, a 14 year boy who has Cerebral Palsy and is unable to communicate. The character, who suspects his father may smother him to end his suffering but is accepting of this fate. His seizures and possible death are argued to be metaphorically represented as freedom from his life and his imprisoned body. His father's intentions are legitimized because of his love for his son. Issues raised in the real life Tracey Latimer case concerning rights to life and assumptions of suffering have been ignored and the book has been the recipient of several recognitions including the Books for Youth Editors Choice (2001), Top 10 Youth First Novels (2000), the American Library Association's 2001 Best Books for Young Adults and Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers and the 2001 Michael L. Printz Honour Book ([www.chapters-indigo.ca](http://www.chapters-indigo.ca)). The back cover of the book reads "The invention of Shawn is compelling, evoking one of our darkest fears and deepest hopes – that a fully conscious and intelligent being may be hidden within such a broken body, as yet unable to declare his existence" (The Horn Book, back cover). In spite of his *genius*, the prevailing attitude in this acclaimed work is one of pity and sadness and the possibility of murder is justified in the name of liberation from an assumed tragic existence.

### **Theorizing Literature and Disability**

Recent scholarship in this field has looked not only at portrayals of disability in relation to stereotype and metaphor but has also approached literature as a force in the wider cultural spectrum seeking to identify the roots, purposes and implications of such pervasive representation. The previous focus on imagery has been surpassed by an increased interest in qualitative inquiry and textual analysis seeking to understand meaning and power in this context of diversity (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Highlighted areas of interest in the analysis of literature and disability include the

application of a gendered perspective, analysis approached through societal understandings of otherness and normalcy and through a deeper exploration of the purpose of disability as the subject of portrayal.

### ***Gendered Approaches***

Approaches to cultural analyses of disability have been identified by Shakespeare (1997) as having to a great extent developed through feminist inspired scholarship surrounding representations of femininity, stereotypes and beauty. Kent (1987) has addressed the oppressive presentation of women with disabilities, often written by able-bodied women, which has traditionally upheld disability as a challenge to femininity thus degrading the status of women with disabilities and evaluations of self-worth. In Fine & Asch's (1988) collection *Women with Disabilities* the role of gender, femaleness and otherness is explored. Disability and gender are viewed through a rights based approach and reveal negative able-bodied attitudes particularly when applied to women. In this collection Kent (1988) investigates the roots of otherness in women due to a pervasive lack of female role models available in literature for young women with disabilities. She identifies being female and having a disability as a representative of a representative of being part of a "double minority" (92). Women with disabilities, she notes, are frequently presented as victims and dependents and authors fail to provide alternate choices, outcomes or roles.

Employing a feminist perspective of embodiment, Thomson (1997a, 1997b) explores the role of societal practices of representation and the consequent production of identity and social narratives. The disabled body is explored as marginal, uncomplicated, exotic, as a spectacle and an "other". Accepting fiction as imitative of reality she demonstrates literature to be reflective of cultural meanings given to bodily forms. Looking at fiction she reviews the classic sympathetic novel in comparison with transgressive black women's writing. Addressing the notion of subjectivity, she

cites the denial of agency and physical objectification as prevalent in cultural arenas. Discussing the works of Morrison, Lorde and Petry however, she demonstrates ways in which physical differences is re-interpreted as power. She puts forth the re-signification of meaning through a critical analysis of cultural viewpoints and seeks disabled bodies to be understood as extraordinary rather than abnormal.

In her analysis of Victorian fiction for girls, Keith (2001) concludes that this type of literature draws readers to a set of negative conclusions. She identifies general observances from the literature including: that there is nothing positive about being disabled, that people with disabilities must learn women's submissive behaviors including patience, cheerfulness, and making the best of things, that people with disabilities should be pitied, but not punished, however they will not be accepted by society, and that impairment is curable if you want it enough and believe sufficiently in God. Pointing to the life-long influence of children's fiction, Keith decries the inaccurate descriptions of disability and the absence of authors with disabilities within this realm.

### *Otherness and Normalcy*

The equation of normalcy and the study of otherness has also evolved from feminist disciplines. The work of Jordonova is discussed by Shakespeare (1997) as influential in the formulation of otherness, highlighting the treatment of the other as objects, dangerous, threatening and wild, and as needing to be managed and possessed. This difference creates what Mitchell & Snyder (1997) describes as a kind of voyeurism in readers, based on curiosity, delight and repulsion.

Morris (1991) shows that the divisive and separatist nature of disability representation is based on fear and denial, in attempts to sever connections with those who are considered unhealthy or undesirable causes them to be labeled and understood as outsiders. The objectification of this

group of people is used to exemplify fears, negative values and characteristics which re-affirm the power and security of the able bodied (Longmore, 1987).

Davis (2002) cites the introduction of statistics and the study of the average in the construction of normalcy. Normality since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been associated with progress (Baynton, 2001) and disability as a hindrance to progress (Shakespeare, 1997). With the existence of this conception of a norm also comes the creation of extremes and anomalies resulting in the average becoming the ideal (Davis, 2002). Though people with disabilities exist as what Longmore (1994, cited in Thomson, 1997a) calls “charismatic deviants,” it is normality in modern life which defines accepted social membership (Baynton, 2001, Keith, 2001). The representation of normality and abnormality upheld by ideology are demonstrated throughout fictional accounts. The ailing female body of Victorian literature is presented as unhealthy and physically incapable (LaCom, 1997). Spiros Antonopolous in McCuller’s (1940) *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* embodies the denial of spiritual capacity (Krumland, 2008). The solitary and mysterious Boo Radley in Lee’s (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the antithesis of what is understood to be average. These characterizations represent bodies and minds which refuse to conform and Davis (2002) argues that this source of difference acts as a controlling force of ableism, reflecting hierarchies of perfection and power. He suggests that the average fits a national mold, enforces homogeneity and upholds illusory notions of equality. This valuation of normality confirms Markotic’s (2003) identification of disability as a “physical embodiment of cultural blunders” (179), where abnormal characters are determined as a threat to the dominant social order (Darke, 1994). Davis (2006) upholds that “the very structure on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character where normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (11).

A type of literature commonly discussed in terms of popular fiction and the pursuit of normality is the crime detective novel. Zola (1987) demonstrates the high incidence of characters

with disabilities in this genre, with as many as five in one book and points out the progressive movement of these characters to more positive and inclusive roles outside of the traditional characterizations as hideous or villainous. Hafferty & Foster (1994) however, in a more recent discussion of crime novels, focused on stories of deaf detectives and disagree with this contention. The characters presented in their analysis get along seamlessly in life and their disabilities are largely unacknowledged, depicted as un-inhibiting in their day-to-day activities. They are proficient lip readers and have constant translators or similar devices that allow them to function flawlessly in the world. In contrast to the assertions of Zola, the authors suggest that these well-off, successful and eccentric characters, uphold expectations of individualism and productivity, are responsible for their own adaptations to the world, and refuse to recognize the societal responsibility to people with disabilities. Though they exist within the framework of normative living, they symbolically represent the devaluation of dependence and the veneration of productivity.

In contrast to the pursuit of normality, Barnes (1997) discusses the outsider fiction of Irvine Welsh whose characters with disabilities in these stories live as part of everyday society. Writing about the poor underworld of drug-using Edinburgh, he cites Tommy, in *Trainspotting* (1993), who becomes HIV positive and Johnny Swann, who has a leg removed because of gangrene, both as a result of drug use. These two characters are argued to be presented as part of the community and day-to-day life, not as an aberrance in accordance with the usual portrayal of disability. Barnes concludes that this outsider's world of deviance, criminality, drug use and poverty includes impairment as a part of life. Additionally, this account could be argued to uphold understandings of the place of disability as belonging within the confines of alternative living. Disability is not extraordinary in this context as it is where it belongs with the gritty, underbelly of society, the already rejected.

### *Narrative Prosthesis, Disability and the “Double Bind”*

Mitchell & Snyder (1997) have argued that a “representational double-bind” (6) exists in the presentation of disability which demarks the consistent peripheral role of disabled characters who are accepted by readers through their own roles of power. Characters with disabilities are shown as both entrenched in marginal roles through cultural devaluation and powerlessness but also used by readers as symbols to lessen social guilt and to point to the ill-treatment of other socially oppressed groups. In addition to upholding roles of marginality and assuaging societal guilt, in a later publication the authors present disability as a “Narrative Prosthesis” (2006) used to hold up otherwise prosaic stories. The presence of limitation, they argue, brings forth a story which begins when something goes awry. This hypothesis is upheld by many examples. Edward’s (2005) *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* is premised on the birth of Phoebe, a twin, born with an intellectual disability who is abandoned at birth by her father. This life-long secret then haunts him and slowly destroys him, his wife, their marriage and her twin brother. Phoebe plays only a peripheral role in the story itself, but without her the narrative is of little interest. Similarly, Lott’s (1991) novel *Jewel* revolves around the birth of Breda Kay, the sixth child of a Mississippi family, who is born with Down syndrome, again allowing disability to propel the story.

Mitchell & Snyder (2001) explore the conceptions of New Social Realism, New Historicism, Biographical Criticism and Transgressive Resignification. Through these methodologies the authors recognize the contributions of these forms of analysis which draw from lived experience used to counter prominent negative images and address contextually based understandings of attitudes, ideology and social institutions. They conclude that representation in artistic and cultural formats produces discontent, but that this practice encourages different ways of addressing how culture should be rather than simply pointing out the way that things are.

The analysis of disability in literature, demonstrated through the development of the aforementioned frameworks no longer relies simply on the imagery put forth, but is pursuant of the reasons behind this imagery, the power and the structures which uphold it.

### Discussion

Silvers (2002) argues vehemently against what she identifies as the “signature thesis” of disability scholars that “...art must be oppressive when it references disability, for otherwise it could not be valued by a society that discriminates against disabled people” (236). She condemns what she observes as the inescapable trappings of a continuous conflict between disability and normality and calls instead for the valued difference of artistic subjects through the acknowledgement of and respect for difference.

Disability writers, in contrast to Silvers’ observations, demonstrate movement towards the positive pursuit of diversity through cultural analysis in art, moving beyond the simple identification of oppressive roles. In spite of the continued use of negative representation of disability in contemporary literature, movement forward has been identified based on the increasing use of transgressive readings and presentations of literature both conscious of and from disabled perspectives. Realistic representations of characters with disabilities have the ability to deepen understandings and to integrate and to include rather than to scapegoat (Andelson, 2005). The valuation of difference sought by Silvers is cited by Mitchell & Snyder (2001) in several analyses including Nussbaum’s (1997) assessment of *Millennial Hall* and the alliance between feminist and disabled communities and in Hamilton’s (1997) recognition of the movement from the grotesque to political identity in German literature.



While still acknowledging the binary relations of normalcy and difference and the often oppressive conditions of society, these factors are viewed as part of working towards a valued reception and presentation of disability in its multiple forms. Historically entrenched in social concepts of normalization, this type of structure points to the possibilities for change and the responsibility of disability scholars and activists to enforce, encourage and create new ways of thinking about disability for people with and without disabilities. Snyder et al. (2002) show that disability works in four ways within the humanities: it expands ways of thinking about form, functions and appearances; it complicates identities, challenges assumptions surrounding the normal and marginal and adds historical dimensions. Art and hence literature can also be seen to hold each of these functions to some degree and this type of analysis recognizing the many facets of disability in literature as the focus of forthcoming studies of disability in this area.

### *Conclusion*

The assessment of literature in the context of disability necessarily denotes the important role of culture as part of any social analysis. While the role of disability in literature has long been ignored by the humanities, its pervasive presence in this medium demands further investigation. The analysis of literature has been informed by the identification of stereotype, the attribution of disability as metaphor or symbolic device and in more recent movement towards a cultural analysis, beyond art and aesthetic seen as a conveyor of norms, a reflection of value systems and as a designator of social value. As the place of disability changes, and the disability movement progresses in the fight against oppression towards one of collective and positive identity, representative mediums must be monitored in terms of their ability to follow suit. The notion of ethics and appropriation in fiction has too long been overshadowed by the protection of artistic freedom (Mills, 2000). The growing field of cultural analysis however calls forth writers and publishers to become

aware of and sensitive to the misappropriation and presentation of disability. As Keith (2001) points out in the assessment of literature as it relates to disability, the goal is not to destroy the books we have loved, but to question what has been learned from them and how they have influenced understandings. We may also speculate how future representations may provide more accurate, representative, and visible presentations of disability.

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