Tongueless: Representation of the Mentally Disabled and the Novel

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TONGUELESS: REPRESENTATION OF THE MENTALLY DISABLED AND THE NOVEL

by

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This study examines the representation of the mentally disabled in the novel for two related outcomes. The first is to prove that the representation of the mentally disabled is not merely a subset of the representation of the disabled in general. This is intended less as a political statement as it is a literary one. Acknowledging and building off the work of writers in disability studies such as David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, and Tobin Siebers who concentrate on the body of the disabled, this study shows that attempts to represent the mentally disabled are fundamentally different than those who are physically disabled. This uniqueness and complexity of representing the mentally disabled in literature leads to the second outcome of discussing eight different novels (Melmoth the Wanderer,
Moby-Dick, The Idiot, The Secret Agent, The Sound and the Fury, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Apartment in Athens, and Flowers for Algernon) where mentally disabled characters are revealed to be vital to the discourse of each respective narrative. These representations may reflect not only historical patterns of cultural values, but more importantly show that the question of the mentally disabled in literature is the question of the structure of each respective novel’s discourse. The result of this new attention to mental disability leads to new readings of the texts in which mental disability occurs, yet has been previously ignored.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the representation of the mentally disabled in the novel for two related goals. The first, as will be discussed in this introduction, is to prove that the representation of the mentally disabled is not merely a subset of the representation of the disabled in general. While acknowledging and building off the work of writers in disability studies such as David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, and Tobin Siebers who concentrate on the disabled body, I nevertheless intend to show that attempts to represent the mentally disabled are fundamentally different than representations of the physically disabled. The deficit in language and intellectual ability inherent to any identifiable construction of mental disability necessarily establishes a complex relationship to the narrative discourse, one that provides unique possibilities of expressing a text’s ideology. This ideology that mental disability helps express is not necessarily ideology about mental disability. In fact, this is generally a secondary
revelation, and for this reason the thematic impact of mental disability has to the novel is more immediate than any reflection of cultural values toward disability that may also be present. This is not to state that the present study is unconcerned with political consequences of literary texts, nor to deny that texts have cultural importance in creating the cultural climate. It is to say, however, as Tobin Siebers writes, “Disability has provided the public imagination with one of its most powerful symbols...but it always symbolizes something other than itself.”¹ The other-than-itself is always most immediately the narrative the representation appears in. As a literary structure, what mental disability expresses in a text is the text itself. Therefore the second goal of this study is to examine eight novels in which mental disability is an integral part of the narrative in order to show what the condition creates in each respective text. While all the examples share certain archetypal dimensions, what they create through their representation is unique to both their aesthetic construction and the discourse of the respective works they appear in. Rather

than reaching the conclusion that representations of the mentally disabled are simple rhetorical symbols to express monolithic abstractions like decay or innocence, this study shows the fundamental complexity inherent to each individual example. Because these representations in their respective novels have by in large been ignored by critics and yet prove to be integral parts of their texts, this study accomplishes as much in regards to mental disability as it does in interpreting the novels in which they appear. Rather than remove the representation from its context, it is examined within its most immediate context: before even the structure of the culture, there is the structure of the narrative.

Disability, Mental and Otherwise

For the last twenty years writers within the field of disability studies have discussed the nature of representation of the disabled in general. The field theoretically is intent on studying the breadth of all that would be defined as the disabled experience, as when Mitchell and Snyder state, “Most basic to the identification of character through disability is the way
in which physical and cognitive differences have been narrated as alien to the normal course of human affairs. To represent disability is to engage oneself in an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of ‘recognizable’ human experiences."\(^2\) While within this quote those with cognitive disabilities are referenced, the general thrust of disability studies prioritizes the body and those whose disabilities are defined through the body. Of course, this does not assume that to be mentally disabled is to not have any physical impairments, nor does it assume that the mentally disabled are disembodied, existing only as a kind of floating cognitive impairment. Nevertheless, studies on disability focus on the specifically disabled body as both the object of study as well as the epiphany for greater cultural insight. For instance, Tobin Siebers states, “Disability offers a challenge to the representation of the body—this is often said. Usually it means that the disabled body provides insight into the fact that all bodies are socially constructed…the disabled body changes the process of representation

itself...Different bodies require and create new modes of representation." Rosemarie Garland-Thomson makes a similar statement when she writes, "disability is not bodily insufficiency, but instead arises from the interaction of physical differences with an environment...Disability is the unorthodox made flesh, refusing to be normalized, neutralized, or homogenized...disability signals that the body cannot be universalized." The focus here is not whether Siebers is correct about the body and representation, or whether Garland-Thomson’s promotion of a social construction model of the body is accurate. Instead, it is to initially address that disability is equated with the body. Therefore the focus in this present study is not whether or not “the disabled body changes the process of representation,” but that such attention in disability on the body has left us to ignore that the disabled mind creates unique possibilities in literary representation.

3 Siebers, Disability Theory, 54
5 The purpose of disability studies as a field is also equated with a compromised body but healthy mind. Corbett Joan O’Toole writes, “the disability movement has three consistent challenges: bringing the disability rights model into the academy; bringing an academic lens to disability; and providing useful information by, about, and for the disability community [italics added]” (296).
The result of such inattention leads us to ultimately miss important parts of the discourse of the works they appear in, and therefore limit our ability to interpret these works.

Definitions of mental disability are extremely vague at best, yet an understanding of the disability is key to recognizing its uniqueness in representation. Long before the medicalization of mental disability, attempts to define the concept were generally made up of euphemisms or dysphemisms: terms such as monsters, freaks, fools, etc. Therefore a 14th century, pre-Renaissance term like “idiot” is used with the same intended meaning as a post-industrial “idiot”: “a natural fool.” Even a post-eugenic, standardized text such as the DSM-IV’s definition is equally vague despite its lists, based on three parts:

(A) Significantly subaverage intellectual functioning: an IQ of approximately 70 or below on an individually administered IQ test (for infants, a clinical judgment of significantly subaverage intellectual functioning). (B) Concurrent deficit or impairments in present adaptive functioning (i.e., the person’s
effectiveness in meeting the standards expected for his or her age by his or her cultural group), in at least two of the following areas: communication, self-care, home living, social/interpersonal skills, use of community resources, self direction, functional academic skills, work, leisure, health, and safety. (C) The onset is before age 18 years.\(^6\)

There is an implicit characteristic of the mentally disabled that is present within this definition by the DSM-IV, if not all definitions, formal or informal, that creates the universal dimension of the condition, especially as it relates to literary representation: diminished language capability. This should not be understood as a literary critic attempting to be a diagnostician. Instead, it is an observation that diminished language capability is present in all definitions and fictional constructions of mental disabilities.

\(^6\) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Technical Review*, (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The onset before 18 years of age is perhaps the only clearly delineated part of this definition, considering all other aspects must be valued against statements such as "The ability of persons with mental retardation to learn depends as much on the learning context available and the kind of teaching as on a specific level of cognitive ability" (Simeonsson, Granlund, et al.). In other words, even two identical mental disabilities are not identical since degree is determined less by the disability and more the environment in which the mentally disabled person lives.
disability. Even if one attempts to define mental disability with only a part of the DSM-IV’s definition, “subaverage intellectual functioning,” assumed in this is diminished language capability if the speaker assumes any relationship between intellect and language. Whether definitions are vague euphemisms like “touched” or “feeble-minded,” diminished language capability is implicit. This means that cross-culturally and over time, recognition and labeling of mental disability are based on communication ability, and that ability, as the signifier suggests, is defined by its deficit: “To be disabled mentally is to be disabled rhetorically.”

Therefore whether a reader finds my distinction to be naïve or misguided, the point realistically stays the same: this is how the mentally disabled have been consistently defined.

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7 The case of autism is an intriguing one here. While an autistic person may have an incredibly complex vocabulary and at times display that vocabulary logically, there remains the issue of socio-cultural awareness. The capacity to know when and how to use that language is diminished. For the interested reader, see more information in Catherine Lord’s studies in autism, especially, “Patterns of Growth in Verbal Abilities Among Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (75.4, 594-604).

Other archetypal characteristics of the mentally disabled exist besides a diminished language ability. Some of these are more pronounced according to the contemporary culture they appear in. For instance, although mentally disabled persons have long been viewed as having apathetic and lazy attitudes, this is especially emphasized at moments when the culture attempts to define them as part of populations of beggars and freeloaders (generally in an attempt to criminalize them or corral them into almshouses). Other characteristics such as childishness, animalistic bodies and posture, and the tendency to burst into violent behavior are all common. Uniting all these characteristics is an overall expression that the mentally disabled person is less human, like a vessel evacuated of its necessary ontological contents, which acts as a marker for mental disability in literature.\footnote{From Martin Luther’s \textit{Colloquia Mensalia}: “For it is in the Devil’s power that he corrupts people who have reason and souls when he possesses them. The Devil sits in such changelings where their soul should have been.” Here not only is it implied that there is a lack of language ability, but a lack of soul as well. Luther calls the mentally disabled “a mass of flesh, \textit{massa carnis}, with no soul.” For more examples of these archetypes, see R.C. Sheerenberger’s \textit{A History of Mental Retardation}, Henri-Jacques Stiker’s \textit{A History of Disability}, and the consistent work of American writers Steven Noll and James Trent.} It is no coincidence, however, that the expression of all
these archetypes occurs through the subject’s ability to use language. In all of the works that occur in this study, both in entire chapters or the more anecdotal examples in this introduction, the mentally disabled character cannot communicate or be communicated with as a normative character expects or demands. Physical capability in representations of the mentally disabled varies widely, as a character like Stevie from Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* can perform domestic errands, while Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot* ultimately cannot even feed himself or perform the most basic physical function. What unites Stevie and Myshkin, along with other representations of the mentally disabled, is their innate vacuousness of intellect, expressed through the inability to communicate. Even when narrators describe nonsensical actions or other characters deliver euphemistic description in order to mark the mentally disabled as such, these descriptions are often founded on the subject’s inability to follow or use language. The consequence and meaning of this inability varies, but central to all representations is the isolation and
inferiority created by the inability to use language as one should.\(^\text{10}\)

If my intent is to distinguish the representation of the mentally disabled from the physical disabled, then it should be curious that the primary characteristic of mental disability that I highlight could theoretically be present in the physically disabled as well. If diminished language capability is the key characteristic, then how does that relate to those like the deaf and mute who would be considered physically disabled but certainly, not now at least, mentally disabled? Yet to say that mental disability assumes diminished language capability does not mean that to have diminished language capability is to be mentally disabled. Nevertheless, there is a unique relationship to be explored in this comparison of disabilities, one that helps reveal just what is at stake in understanding the representation of the mentally disabled. Therefore I provide an example of a deaf-mute character, and relate him to the representation of a mentally disabled character explored

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\(^{10}\) This sense of what should be capable is essential. Therefore the representation of a mute mentally disabled person is different from an infant. Part of the definition of the mentally disabled in literary representations is that they “contain” both the inability to communicate, as well as the shadow of the normative person who can communicate.
more fully later in the study, Benjy Compson. The deaf-mute appears in Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, and while not all critics agree whether this man in white is a fraud or not, in this context veracity is irrelevant; to be a fraud is to imitate as best as possible a true deaf-mute. At the novel’s outset the deaf-mute holds a slate that reminds passengers on a Mississippi steam boat that their Christian duty is charity:

Meanwhile, he with the slate continued moving slowly up and down, not without causing some stares to change into jeers, and some jeers into pushes, and some pushes into punches; when suddenly, in one of his turns, he was hailed from behind by two porters carrying a large trunk; but as the summons, though loud, was without effect, they accidentally or otherwise swung their burden against him, nearly overthrowing him; when, by a quick start, a peculiar inarticulate moan, and a pathetic telegraphing of his fingers, he involuntarily betrayed that he was not alone dumb, but also deaf.
From his betaking himself to this humble quarter, it was evident that, as a deck-passenger, the stranger, simple though he seemed, was not entirely ignorant of his place …Though neither soiled nor slovenly, his cream-colored suit had a tossed look, almost linty, as if, traveling night and day from some far country beyond the prairies, he had long been without the solace of a bed. His aspect was at once gentle and jaded, and, from the moment of seating himself, increasing in tired abstraction and dreaminess. Gradually overtaken by slumber, his flaxen head drooped.\textsuperscript{11}

Although the language here does suggest some of the archetypal language of the description of a mentally disabled man—“simple,” “ignorant,” gentle,” with a drooping figure—he is nevertheless not mentally disabled. His independence of being on the boat, his attempt to procure a living, and his relationship with those on board the boat do not signify a mentally disabled man. When he is earlier pushed aside by those climbing on

\textsuperscript{11} Herman Melville, \textit{The Confidence-Man} (New York: New American Library), 5.
board, it is because he cannot hear them coming, not because he is intellectually incapable of understanding their language. Contrasted with this image of the deaf-mute’s reaction to others is the following description of Luster, Benjy Compson’s caretaker, talking with his grandmother Dilsey about the missing Quentin:

“Whar Mr Jason gone, mammy?”

“Dat’s some mo of yo business aint it?” Dilsey said. She began to clear the table.

“Hush, Benjy. Luster gwine take you out to play.”

“Whut he done to Miss Quentin, mammy?” Luster said.

“Aint done nothin to her. You all git on outen here.”

“I bet she aint here,” Luster said, Dilsey looked at him. “How you know she aint here?”

“Me and Benjy seed her clamb out de window last night. Didn’t us, Benjy?”

“You did?” Dilsey said, looking at him.
“We sees her doin hit ev’y night,” Luster said…“I aint lying. Ask Benjy ef I is.”

I use this portion of The Sound and the Fury not because it gives a stereotypical physical description of a severely mentally disabled man—these are plentiful—but instead to show Benjy’s relationship to language. Although he narrates the first part of the text, this is a conceit to the novel—he cannot express this narration to anyone, nor is he fully aware of the meaning of what he says. Here in this passage, Dilsey tells Benjy to hush, and although it was not explicitly told, we assume he was moaning, his only means of verbal communication. When Dilsey looks for verification of Luster’s words, she looks “past” Benjy to the questionable source himself. Luster twice refers to Benjy as an eyewitness, and this is a flippant, mocking suggestion by Luster as it is predicated on the idea that Benjy can’t be an eyewitness—at least, not one who can later report what he saw. In Melville’s description of a deaf man there is the language of mental disability, but this is only through the transposed thoughts and judgments of others. He is

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unable to communicate, but intellectually capable. Benjy’s inability to use language is such an overt part of his character that it need not be explained to the reader, and is the stuff of jokes by his caretaker. While all the characters in this study are not as severely disabled as Benjy, they all suffer from this same inability to use language as the normative person “should.” It is not the same as the deaf man’s inability to communicate.\textsuperscript{13} If poetry is the attempt to use language to express that which language cannot express, then the mentally disabled character cannot use language adequately to express that which language both can and cannot express. Generally this inability occurs not because the text seeks to recognize a biological problem in the brain, but because within the mentally disabled character the inability is a reflection of an implicit vacuousness. The lack of language is often the

\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Writing Deafness}, Christopher Krentz points out that “Deaf characters in canonical literature represent a certain threatening epistemological disorder. They typically lurk on the edges of the narratives or appear indistinctly in poems even seemingly about them, not quite clearly defined, transgressing conventional boundaries and ways of thinking” (103). If this is true, then there is more research to be done on the common ground between some deaf characters and the mentally disabled. Such research may find that the former is similar to the latter only when the culture understood the deaf this way. The depiction of the mentally disabled character, however, as will be discussed, has not been “corrected” through cultural values.
manifestation of the lack of all that makes a person communicate, whether that be termed reason, soul, or intellect. The language deficit therefore reflects the emptiness that is the mentally disabled person’s identity.

To understand the relevance of language as it relates to the literary representation of the mentally disabled, I return to those seminal writers on disability who have already discussed the common uses of disability within literary works. Mitchell and Snyder state in *Narrative Prosthesis* that “Disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.”

In his poem “Respondez,” Walt Whitman can therefore use mental disability the same way he might use a generic occupation or social role: “Let the slaves be masters! let the masters be slaves! / Let the reformers descend from the stands where they are forever bawling! let an idiot or insane person appear on each of the stands! / Let the Asiatic, the African, the European, the American, and the Australian, go armed against the murderous

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14 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47.
stealthiness of each other!”\textsuperscript{15} The second possibility according to Mitchell and Snyder is that all disability becomes metaphor: Quasimodo’s hunchback is more than just a problem of posture, and Ahab’s leg is more than the result of sticking one’s leg in the jaws of a giant whale. With this understanding disability always acts as a foil against the normative. Beware the path you travel as there are disabilities present to show what dangers await; or, applaud the efforts of this hero who has overcome the initial paralyzing disabilities. In Mitchell and Snyder’s words, “Physical and cognitive anomalies promise to lend a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions.”\textsuperscript{16}

If disability in general provide an embodiment for the abstract, it is too much to assume that physical and mental disabilities have the “ability” to create the same kind of “textual abstractions.” Ahab’s leg may create a multitude of meanings for the text, but the fact that Ahab knows his leg is missing, that he can make eloquent speeches about vengeance for his leg, and that he has the

\textsuperscript{15} Walt Whitman, \textit{Leaves of Grass and Other Writings} (New York: Norton, 2002), lines 45-7.

\textsuperscript{16} David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, \textit{Narrative Prosthesis}, 48.
intellectual capability to lead a crew into the fight against Moby Dick necessarily makes any metaphorical embodiment through the leg different than what is capable through the impaired mind. To remain in *Moby-Dick*, what Pip is able to signify in the text with his diminished self-awareness and inability to describe himself sets him apart from Ahab. To state that both characters are other-ed through their disability may be true, but it remains much too vague to be helpful in understanding the representation of the mentally (or physically) disabled, or just as important, *Moby-Dick* as a text. Therefore the earlier discussion of the ever-present characteristic of mental disability, diminished language capability, becomes the key in recognizing the unique narrative role that representations of mental disability create in the text.

In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson creates nine categories that serve as an overall “typology” for disabled characters. The list is relevant to all disability, and includes metaphorical uses that will appear in this study, especially “disability as articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors,” “disability as bearer of moral
deficit/evil," "disability as epiphany," "disability as inarticulable and enigmatic tragic insight," and "disability as hermeneutical impasse." Yet if these categories prove to be largely applicable to both physical and mental disabilities, it does not assume that these categories will have the same role within the narratives they appear. For instance, Quayson points to Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a character who typifies the “disability as epiphany.” The revelation of Tom Robinson’s withered arm shows “the need for a cautious withholding of judgment in how different characters are evaluated.” In William Wordsworth’s poem “The Idiot Boy,” this same type, “disability as epiphany,” is also present. The poet watches a mother hoist her idiot boy onto a pony so that he can bring back a doctor for a sick friend. He fails to do so, and his mother is forced to wander for him during the night; the friend who is sick back home, now forced to worry about

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18 Ibid, 47.
19 A small note about labels. In texts that regularly use the term “idiot” and “idiocy,” I will do the same. I do not hesitate in mixing a euphemism with a dysphemism in this study. The history of labeling mental disability shows it to be a steady progression from euphemism to dysphemism. The change of label cannot change the cultural value of that which is labeled, meaning that eventually “mental disability” will be on the same signifier scrap heap as “idiot,” “feeble-minded,” and more recently “mentally retarded.”
the idiot boy and his mother, gets better. Idiocy in the poem therefore serves as an epiphany for the reader; the boy’s sheer joy of being on the pony as well as the joy of the mother in seeing him on the pony, as well as her joy at reuniting with him, fits well into Quayson’s category. Yet the boy’s idiocy also creates the threat of death in the story. His inability to command the pony is equivalent to his inability to call the doctor or understand that idling at the waterfall is not the purpose of his journey. While disability then serves as an epiphany, it also serves as a tremendous threat. The mother’s message is devoured by the boy’s inability to understand her; even the pony is described as being unable to understand the idiot boy on top of his back. The use of mental disability in the poem therefore typifies Quayson’s category, yet as a structural element creates much more than epiphany, or any other concept within Quayson’s typology. 20 Idiocy is the site of horror in the story—to mother, horse, and narrator. It is also

20 This is not meant to be a criticism as Quayson himself understands these to be broad categories: “These nine sets must be taken as a provisional mapping of the field only. There is no doubt that combinations of different categories will produce different emphases and therefore varying potential sets” (52). I only want to push this qualifier further, and say that the use of mental disability creates “different emphases and therefore varying potential sets.”
the site of suspense, as the narrator is able to describe all the wildly different possible locations only because he knows that the reader will allow for such locations given the incapacity of the boy. At the same time, Wordsworth’s version of idiocy here allows him to stress the bond of mother and son. The narrator states, “And Betty's most especial charge, Was, / "Johnny! Johnny! mind that you / Come home again, nor stop at all, / Come home again, whate'er befal, /My Johnny do, I pray you do'.” This could be the worry of a mother for any son, thus representing an archetypal mother-son bond. Wordsworth, however, is able to accentuate both the worry as well as the intimacy that exists between mother and son by using the boy’s idiocy. The narrator has established that he understands the pony as much as he understands the boy (in fact, the narrator and pony are equally puzzled by the boy), but the mother is able to penetrate any distance disability may cause when Johnny responds to her wish for him to come home:

To this did Johnny answer make,

Both with his head, and with his hand,

---

And proudly shook the bridle too,
And then! his words were not a few
Which Betty well could understand.  

These first two lines reflect a more external understanding of the boy; it is a distance reflected in the narrator’s understanding of him. The last two lines, however, work to contrast this with an intimate knowledge. When the mother and son are reunited at the end of the poem, idiocy has been both epiphany as well as deadly threat. The epiphany arises from the intense intimacy of these two people. The threat is to all involved. His disability threatens the life of the friend who needs a doctor, his own existence in that he may wander into the waterfall that dazzles him, and the well-being of his mother who clearly adores him.

Not only does this example in Wordsworth work to show that mental disability defies as much as typifies categories related to disability in general, it also signifies that at the essence of representing disability is the anxiety that language is altered, if not completely eradicated. In Wordsworth’s poem, the all-important message of the mother is lost in the boy.

Other than the narrator’s descriptions, it is this loss of the message in the mind of the boy that shows the reader he is disabled; that is, through the loss of the message mental disability is performed, rather than just described. To represent the mentally disabled then is to represent the potential for corruption of language. Depending on the position of the character, that corruption could be one character’s message (as in Wordsworth’s poem), or it could be the corruption of the narrative as a whole, either through more literal means such as the mentally disabled character positioned as narrator, or metaphorically through the character’s role of interlocutor. A consideration of other texts with mental disability as a concept or mentally disabled characters finds that the threat of corruption of language is present. In John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* Lennie consistently cannot comprehend what is at stake in George’s words, seen most critically when George tells him to look into the distance and imagine the ranch with the rabbits. Lennie, unable to understand the message as the reader does, is unaware that he will soon be murdered. In Mark Haddon’s *A Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, the autistic narrator consistently
misreads the message of surrounding characters so that
the reader and those misunderstood characters create a
kind of bond through the narrator’s inadequacy with
language.

Because of this relationship to language in the
narrative, it is important that the representation of the
mentally disabled be understood as a narratological
question as much as it is a biological or cultural one.
When Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states, “Characters are
rendered by a few determining strokes that create an
illusion of reality,” implicit in such a belief is that a
real-world disability is attempting to be created.23 This
may very well be the case. But to search Wordsworth’s
“Idiot Boy,” or any of the texts in this study, for the
basis for what “few determining strokes were used” is to
limit the understanding of character, whether disabled or
not, to mimetic qualities. At stake in determining the
idiot boy’s character is not simply whether he reflects
19th century English beliefs about the mentally disabled,
but how the corruption of language due to idiocy
structures the entire poem. To study the idiot boy’s
disability is less about studying disability in relation

23 Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 10.
to a real world referent than it is about the discourse of the poem he appears in.

Representation and Character

If the source material for disability studies is literature, then disability that appears within it must be understood as part of that literature. While certainly there are cultural consequences to disability in literature, in order to evaluate those consequences, whether they be positive or negative, recognition must occur that the disability is a fictional construct, existing only in a fictional world that necessarily operates differently from our own. Therefore, to study the representation of the disability, whether the ends be greater understanding of a text or "to advance the cause of the disabled and promote social change," the means are the same. ²⁴ Disability (in all its forms) in literature must ultimately be a narratological question before it is a cultural one. Even seemingly overt negative portrayals

of disability must be understood within the discourse of the work it appears in.

Because disability is generally read through a character’s experience with disability (as is the case in this study), some attention must be paid to the concept of character itself. Yet a temptation exists to simply read the character of a work as a mimetic representation of a real world referent. While certainly the mimetic qualities of a character are part of its construction, there is nevertheless more that must be remembered if a character (disabled or otherwise) is to be read as a structural part of the narrative. Mieke Bal addresses the importance of understanding character as a concept, and the dangers of not:

The first problem that arises when we attempt to account for the character-effect is that of drawing a clear dividing line between human person and character. The resemblance between the two is too great for that: we even go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh, and to search for or with it. This is a major attraction of narrative. But it also leads us into asking questions that are
not only frankly impertinent (‘How many children had Lady Macbeth?’) but that reduce the narrative to flat realism. This is a risk, for example, when we identify so much with characters in Beloved that we absolutely insist on the natural status of Beloved.25

Bal’s warning is perhaps seen within reactions to depictions of the disabled: “I don’t like this text because it makes the disabled man look stupid,” or “This is an inappropriate depiction because the disabled woman is viewed as a parasite.”

Although Bal states “no satisfying, coherent theory of character exists,” I want to explicitly state parts of character that will be used in this study to allow character to be more than “flat realism.” In Reading People, Reading Plots James Phelan makes two distinctions for defining character. First is the difference between the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic component, and the second between a dimension and a function. The mimetic component is the most historically recognizable, explaining how characters are “images of possible

25 Mieke Bal, Narratology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 115.
people.” Besides the mimetic component, Phelan introduces the thematic as the degree to which a character is representative: of a town, of an age, of a religion, of any possible group. The synthetic component is the degree to which the reader understands a character to be a fictional construct. In addition are the terms dimension and function. A dimension is what Seymour Chatman and Bal call a “trait”: “any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears.” A function, however, “is a particular application of that attribute.”

For the sake of clarity, a brief application of these terms to one of the texts of this study, Conrad’s The Secret Agent, may be useful. Stevie’s mimetic component is certainly an example of the problematic

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26 The degree to which mimesis is possible is examined in great length by all critics from Aristotle to postmodernists, and even the definition can be troublesome. Scholes and Kellogg state that the mimetic qualities of even classical texts are debated; for example, is Achilles’ knowledge of his own death mimetic, due to his relationship with that death due to his position as half-god. Postmodern narrative theorists to varying degrees deny the possibility of mimesis, but must nevertheless engage with the idea if for no other reason than its (attempted) presence in classical texts, as well as its presence (if only to disrupt it) in contemporary texts. See Andrew Gibson’s Toward a Postmodern Theory of Narrative and Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel.

nature of mimesis. Stevie is described as a kind simpleton, but ultimately frustrated young man, given to acting out violently when he cannot contain thoughts about suffering. While his thematic component may be in his physical approximation to the Cesar Lombroso criminal type, this acting out due to the suffering of others may be a mimetic component (and ironically non-Lombrosian). Both Stevie’s mimetic and thematic components exist as dimensions until each become part of the progression of the narrative: his misplaced horror and pity for a cabdriver’s horse is what causes Winnie to push for Mr. Verloc to participate in his life more, and his thematic relationship to the mentally disabled is what gives reason for Verloc to use a proxy (as well as ultimately fail) in the terror bombing. Certainly, these identifications should and will be expanded, but for present purposes it suffices to provide these examples of Phelan’s categories. Already then the reader can see that this expansion of the vocabulary of character gives the critic/reader the ability to express Stevie’s participatory role in the novel, both as agent and metaphor. It is not enough to say that Stevie’s depiction reinforces the stereotype that the mentally
disabled are given to violent self-expression. Instead, as the fifth chapter discusses, the character of Stevie acts as both individual and the ironic collective of a criminologist. Both of these functions are part of Stevie’s character, as important to the discourse of the novel as his seemingly individual predilections to draw circles and please his brother-in-law. The result of examining Stevie with this expanded idea of character is analysis of The Secret Agent itself; if aesthetics reveals the content of the work, then an expanded definition of the mentally disabled character is part of that revelation.

Phelan’s categories of character are implicit in the discussions of the mentally disabled characters in this study, as is Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony. Bakhtin states, “the linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments—that is, precisely that background that, as we see, complicates the path of
any word toward its object.” Bakhtin’s idea that characters are locations of different voices may seem to be contrary to Phelan’s understanding of character, as the former subsumes character into the nature of language. Yet this idea does not exclude Phelan’s—instead, Phelan’s understanding of both the thematic and synthetic component of character is expressed through Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony. Bakhtin writes, “But is it impossible to reveal, through a character’s acts and through these acts alone, his ideological position and the ideological world at its heart, without representing his discourse? It cannot be done.” Perhaps expectedly, this connection between polyphony and the thematic component of character will be seen most clearly in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s The Idiot. Prince Myshkin, the epileptic hero of the novel, has a thematic role to the novel that makes him the site of both the text’s fear and anxiety toward mental disability as well as its potential for sacrificial love. More subtly, Spiros Antonopoulos in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter expresses this

29 Phelan himself discusses this in Reading People, Reading Plots.
30 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 335.
relationship between Phelan and Bakhtin as the disabled
Antonopoulos contains the novel’s pessimistic ubiquity of
selfishness as well as the more muted voice of unceasing
love.

As a part of the narrative’s discourse, the mimetic
representation of a character undoubtedly has importance,
and may reveal cultural assumptions in this context about
disability. To fully recognize that character’s
representation of mental disability, however, the
structure of the narrative’s discourse must be the
context of any analysis.

The Nature of Representation

An example, even a seemingly minor one, shows both
this uniqueness and complexity in the representation of
the mentally disabled, as well as how it works to express
the overall ideology of the text. Near the beginning of
James Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, in a section
entitled “At the Forks,” the writer and Walker Evans come
across the home of a young couple and their adult charge:
a severely mentally disabled man. Agee attempts some
communication with the man, though the only verbal
response he receives is the guttural “Awnk” repeated time and again. Therefore Agee asks and receives directions from the husband and wife, and he and Evans set about their way to begin their time with sharecropping families. Because of the importance of a shared reading of a mentally disabled character at the outset of this study, I quote Agee extensively:

The other man might have been fifty by appearance, yet through a particular kind of delicateness upon his hands, and hair, and skin—they were almost infantine—I was sure he was still young, hardly out of his twenties, though again the face was seamed and short as a fetus. This man, small-built and heavy jointed, and wandering in his motions like a little child, had the thorny beard of a cartoon bolshevik, but suggested rather a hopelessly deranged and weeping prophet, a D.H. Lawrence whom male nurses have just managed to subdue in a straitjacket...

The older man came up suddenly behind me, jamming my elbow with his concave chest and saying fiercely Awnk, awnk, while he glared at
me with enraged and terrified eyes. Caught so
abruptly off balance, my reflexes went silly
and I turned toward him questioning ‘politely’
with my face, as if he wanted to say something,
and could which I had not quite heard. He did
want urgently to say something, but all that
came out was this blasting of Awnk, awnk, and a
thick roil of saliva that hung like semen in
his beard...The woman spoke to him sharply though
not unkindly (the young man’s eyes remained
serene), as if he were a dog masturbating on a
caller, and he withdrew against a post of the
porch and sank along it to the floor with his
knees up sharp and wide apart and the fingers
of his left hand jammed as deep as they would
go down his gnashing mouth, while he stayed his
bright eyes on me...

The older man came honking up at my elbow,
holding out a rolled farm magazine. In my
effort to give him whatever form of attention
could most gratify him I was stupid again; the
idea there was something he wanted me to read;
and looked at him half-questioning this, and
not yet taking what he offered me. The woman, in a voice that somehow, though contemptuous (it implied, You are more stupid than he is), yielded me for the first time her friendship and that of her husband, so that happiness burst open inside me like a flooding of sweet water, said, he want to give it to you...he stayed at my side like a child, watching me affectionately while I talked to them...

As we started, I looked back and held up my hand. The older man was on the dirt on his hands and knees coughing like a gorilla and looking at the dirt between his hands.  

What the representation here creates is concisely seen in how the narrator “reads” and reacts to the language and communication attempts of the older man. The passage opens with the man described as both mad prophet and D.H. Lawrence, each suggesting some kind of wisdom or “message” buried within the older man. Yet the man can only watch the narrator; if the previous descriptions imply a message, the narrator also recognizes that the

older man cannot deliver it. When he does in the second paragraph, it is only overt failure. To the narrator “Awnk, Awnk” acts as an indecipherable language, leaving him confused both in his descriptions as well as his reactions. The narrator describes the older man as “jamming” his elbow into him with a “fierce” look of “enraged” and “terrified eyes.” The description here is a violent one, and yet Agee’s response is to question him “politely.” Clearly the violence in the man’s description is understood as a misguided or impotent threat, as Agee gives no evidence of being afraid. The sister is able to communicate with the older man, but rhetorically this does not put the reader any closer to the weeping prophet: the narrator’s description of the communication from sister to brother is that of pushing a way a masturbating dog. The communication that does exist is completely foreign, and moving from master to unruly beast, as later suggested by the narrator’s description of the older man as a gorilla. Thus far then the mentally disabled older man is both the image of a secret wisdom as well as sub-human beast, both of which are created through the older man’s inability to communicate and the narrator’s inability (despite his apparent
willingness) to understand. Certainly other rhetorical means of presenting the older man are at work—the image of the slow child, the foreign other, and incarnate chaos are displayed, all of which serve to strengthen the unbridgeable gap between the narrator and the older man.

At the same time this unbridgeable gap due to the ineffective communication of the older man serves to create another bond, ironically through the successful communication between first the sister and the brother, and then indirectly to the narrator. Because the narrator has taken two paragraphs to show the incomprehensibility of the older man, his sister’s ability to deliver a message from the brother to the narrator is the impetus for a joy of solidarity in the narrator. The narrator tries to understand the older man; he cannot: “[I] looked at him half-questioning this, and not yet taking what he offered me.” When the sister, however, reveals the older man’s desire a new bond is created not between the narrator and the older man but among the narrator and the sister and her husband.

The entire scene works as a brilliant pseudo-iterative sequence for all of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Occurring in the first thirty pages of the work,
this scene shows Agee’s inability to communicate, yet through the kindness of a third, local party, communication finally occurs and Agee feels the connection with the people that he so desires. Throughout the book, Agee attempts to understand the life of a sharecropping family, and only through a local party does he learn—not so much about the idea of a “sharecropping family,” but of the party who has communicated with him. The scene’s entire weight rests on the ability to manipulate a mentally disabled man’s inability to use language. The physical descriptions of the man only heighten the man’s “unreadability”—he isn’t human, isn’t reasonable, isn’t predictable in any way. But it is through these very qualities that the narrator feels connection with the sister and her husband. The last time the older man is witnessed he is on his hands and knees “like a gorilla,” staring at the dirt between his hands. It is an important description as it shows that the bond that has occurred is only because of the mentally disabled man. No connection with the man was made—his foreignness and inability to communicate assure that so he only concentrates on the dirt underneath him. This scene loses its rhetorical weight if the older man’s
mental disability does not exist. Although he is certainly physically marked, it is not a deficiency in body that creates his rhetorical role in the scene. Instead it is specifically his cognitive disability which helps create the structure of the scene and therefore the meaning of the scene.

Evaluating the structure of the scene requires more than an analysis of the mimetic qualities of the older man. It requires the older man to be understood as a part of the scene’s discourse; certainly mimesis is part of this, but so too are the older man’s thematic and synthetic parts of his character. Other aspects of the representation are implicit. As Seymour Chatman writes, “character is reconstructed by the audience from evidence announced or implicit in an original construction and communicated by the discourse.”

Issues of how information about the older man is obtained, and through whose focalization, are at the center of the above reading. As a writer Agee has made a specific choice to let the reader’s initial understanding be harsh and ugly, and it is a choice that we must consider in relation to

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representation. As well, we learn about the mentally
disabled “older man” through the narrator’s focalization
of that man. We therefore are not learning what Agee the
author believes about the man as a focus on mimetic
qualities may lead us to. He is focalized through a
single person, in this case the narrator. As readers we
must decide whether we should believe this narrator or
perhaps think the narrator represents another, ethnically
inferior view. It is a decision about the reader’s
position in relation to the text: is this narrator
writing to an audience with prejudices that we are
purposely supposed to feel uncomfortable with? Of
course, just because the narrator lets us know of the
disability through harsh language does not mean we should
accept that language as what is best or most accurate.
Even the very question of where the reader is placed in
the scene is not only important in understanding any kind
of historical determination of Agee or his culture’s view
of the disabled, but more importantly how Let Us Now
Praise Famous Men works as a literary text. Despite the
fact that the older man appears in only these pages,
mental disability proves to be a foundational structural
element to Agee’s work. It is only a small example of
what occurs on a much larger scale in the narratives examined in this study. Yet even in this minor example by Agee the same principle is at work: revelations about how mental disability is textually represented lead to revelations about the text these representations occur in. Through the narratological decisions of how to describe, order, and focalize the mentally disabled man, the ideology of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in regards to the documentary subject, objectification, and the possibility of solidarity with another occurs.

The Texts

The texts chosen for this study will frustrate any reader looking for coherence related to an evolution of the cultural representation of the mentally disabled.\(^3^3\) I do not seek answers as to how authors have related to their culture, nor how the following texts are

\(^3^3\) Even in a study about mental disability and the wider culture, chronology is certainly no indication of progress in the treatment of the mentally disabled. Though we have done away with the most heinous ideologies of eugenics-era beliefs, the medicalization of the mentally disabled and the creation of a professional class to “assist” them is certainly not wholly a positive. For more information and opinions, see Henri-Jacques Stiker’s *A History of Disability* and Steven Noll and James Trent’s *Mental Retardation in America*. Both provide evidence that the pre-modern concept of the community, church, or family as caretaker are all arguably as healthy for the mentally disabled person as modern medicalization.
representative of ideologies toward the mentally 
disabled. This is not meant to deny that the culture in 
which the texts were written played some part in the 
construction of the mentally disabled character. It is 
obviously no coincidence that during the early- to mid-
20th century, when American and European eugenics were at 
their height, authors like William Faulkner, John 
Steinbeck, Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, Tennessee 
Williams and others used rhetoric surrounding eugenics 
and mental disability as a whole. Works like Martin 
Halliwell’s *Images of Idiocy* address these texts as they 
exist as “cultural representations of idiocy.” I am 
presently concerned with the literary representations of 
mental disability, not because it is the only focus worth 
studying, but because it is the focus most ignored.

Instead, I have chosen the texts based on two 
criteria: the uniqueness and importance (relative to the 
novel) of mental disability as a structural element of 
the work. I do not mean to suggest that mental disability 
acts as the hinge that creates complete interpretive 
unity. In his *Narrative Discourse* Genette, despite 
cataloguing many of the structural elements of the 
narrative that will be used in my own interpretations,
states, “it would be unfortunate, it seems to me, to seek ‘unity’ at any price, and in that way to force the work’s coherence—which is, of course, one of criticism’s strongest temptations, one of its most ordinary (not to say most common) ones, and also one most easy to satisfy, since all it requires is a little interpretative rhetoric.”

The intention here is not to see mental disability’s presence in these texts as the sole lynchpin to interpreting the “right” view of the novel. Rather, the evaluation of mental disability (whether as an ideological concept or as a character) as a foundational part of the novels’ discourse; to see how it operates in the novel is to also see how the novel operates as a whole.

Rather than implicitly suggest a coherent evolution in representation by examining the texts in chronological order, the texts are arranged according to a broad categorization of how mental disability is used in the novels. These categories are to a certain degree arbitrary and do not “contain” the texts in any way. The texts do not exist to justify the categories. Instead,

they provide a cursory definition of the various representations in order for the reader to more immediately generalize motifs within the complexities of the representations.

The study begins with Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Daniel Keyes’s *Flowers for Algernon*, the oldest and most recent texts, respectively. In both texts, mental disability becomes the ever-present threat of a fate at the very least equal to death. In *Melmoth*, despite the fact that no major character is mentally disabled, all characters fear mental disability even more than they fear death. And for good reason. The titular character, a man who sold his soul to the devil and may only reclaim it by tricking an innocent into taking his place, attempts to do so by horrifying his victims into acquiescence through physical and metaphysical threats: “You think that the intellectual power is something distinct from the vitality of the soul, or, in other words, that if even your reason should be destroyed...your soul might yet enjoy beatitude in the full exercise of
its enlarged and exalted faculties.”35 The threat then is that if one becomes mentally disabled, access to the soul is lost, and therefore hopes for eternal paradise are likewise lost. While *Flowers for Algernon* does not use mental disability as a sort of eternal limbo from the soul, this does not mean mental disability is any less horrifying a prospect in the novel; in this text there is no concern with the soul as the human experience is limited to the intellectual experience. Therefore mental disability becomes the end of one’s human existence.

When Charlie Gordon, a mentally disabled man made intelligent through an experimental surgery, begins to lose his intelligence, we as readers do not return to the pity we had for him at the beginning of the novel. Instead, the pity is for the decaying hyper-intelligent Charlie who, like the reader, looks at the prospect of mental disability as total oblivion. For Charlie Gordon to become disabled is for Charlie Gordon to die. Keyes therefore manages to shift the reader’s initial pity caused by mental disability to the creeping horror that makes the book such a tragedy.

35 Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 57. All further references to this edition are given in the text.
If both *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *Flowers for Algernon* create mental disability to be a horrifying existential threat, the following two texts operate very similarly. Both *Moby-Dick* and *The Idiot* use the Gothic language of horror in mental disability. Yet if both texts operate using the inhumanity of the mentally disabled, that inhumanity must be understood as a positive and negative force. The negative echoes Maturin and Keyes, but the positive is new and decidedly religious in nature. Both mentally disabled figures, Pip and Prince Myshkin, are to a degree crushed under the weight of their mental disability. At the same time both figures use that mental disability to create (or attempt to create, as the success is arguable) transcendence. The struggle with language that creates horror is also the struggle with language in expressing the divine.

In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Pip is generally in the periphery of textual interpretation. Yet it is precisely through looking at Pip that the religious commentary of the novel can be most fully explored. Although Ahab may be raging against the divine and Starbuck attempting to be obedient toward it, only Pip in
the novel has a direct experience with the divine through being temporarily lost at sea. Ishmael states,

...from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at last, they said he was...Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.36

From this moment on Pip’s self becomes divided; the boy is no longer able to recognize his own identity, instead calling out for his body as though he had drowned in the sea. Ahab takes to Pip like a homeopathic remedy, seeing his own experience with Moby Dick to be similar to Pip’s with the sea. In the end, however, we see that Ahab’s experience is not the same as Pip’s, at least not completely. Not only does Pip’s mental disability become the result of all divine encounters, it is also one way in which the reader sees Melville’s need for brotherhood: because the encounter with the divine is so troubling,

36 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (New York: Penguin, 2002), 454. All further references to this edition are given in the text.
Pip becomes the very metaphorical reason that people like Ishmael and Queequeg must cling to one another for hopes of survival.

Despite his similarities with Pip, Prince Myshkin of The Idiot is disabled like no other character. Epileptic, he is extremely high-functioning at the beginning of the novel after spending years in Switzerland before returning to Russia and nearly cured of his disability. Yet by the end of the novel Myshkin is the lowest functioning character of the entire study: he is unable to care for himself, recognizes no one, and seemingly creates nothing but disgust and pity to those who visit him in his debilitated state. Myshkin therefore echoes the Gothic horror present in Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer, yet at the same time through his efforts to save both Nastasya Filippovna and her murderer Rogozhin, Myshkin is also the salvific presence needed for those who are otherwise lost. Myshkin’s idiocy performs the Orthodox ethic present throughout all of Dostoevsky’s latter works: the very fire which warms is also the fire that burns, and so Myshkin as a person is both the force that saves and the force that destroys; yet like a fool for Christ the only person that can be
destroyed is himself. Myshkin takes on the failed 
redemption of both Nastasya and Rogozhin, making his 
final descent into idiocy both the proof of his salvific 
ability as well as the failure of it.

In both Moby-Dick and The Idiot, Pip and Myshkin’s 
disabilities do not represent possible transcendence as 
much as they represent how such transcendence can occur. 
Therefore the need for community in Pip and the kenotic 
act in Myshkin is a way to transcendence for others. The 
third category of representation differs in only subtle 
ways, yet these subtleties reveal entirely new 
representations. In Conrad’s The Secret Agent and Carson 
McCullers’s The Heart is a Lonely Hunter the mentally 
disabled characters are the very embodiment of the 
abstract. If the disabilities of Pip and Myshkin work as 
signposts toward an abstract transcendence, the mentally 
disabled in Conrad and McCullers are the dramatic 
expression of those abstractions themselves.

In The Secret Agent the inability of Verloc and the 
rest of his anarchist colleagues’ to be of any use to the 
movement—any movement—finds its expression through the 
coercion of Stevie as terrorist bomb pack-mule. When 
Stevie accidentally blows himself up in the bomb’s
delivery to the Greenwich Observatory he reflects the hopeless quest of being useful that all the novel’s characters engage in. With Stevie dead, we know that Verloc has no chance for redemption, either in the eyes of his foreign masters or his wife. The depravity of the entire Verloc home, if not all the political movements in England at the time, are therefore played out through Stevie’s body because of his mental disability.

The character of Spiros Antonopoulos in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter provides both the embodiment of Freud’s concept of narcissism, yet seemingly in perfect contradiction is also the source of the novel’s only unselfish behavior. He is selfishness made flesh, yet enigmatically the source of all that is unselfishness within the novel. John Singer is the devoted disciple to Antonopoulos, despite the fact that the latter is unable to care for any experience that does not benefit his own carnal appetites. Eventually Antonopoulos becomes such an insular figure that he is happily bed-ridden since caretakers must provide his every want and need. Yet despite his incredible narcissism, he provides his disciple Singer with the will to endure the narcissism of others. Antonopoulos therefore serves as the text’s
metaphor for the selfishness that keeps everyone in the novel so isolated, while at the same time providing the motivation for the only character to overcome this selfishness. This contradiction makes him similar to Myshkin: Antonopoulos is seemingly both failure and promise of success at the same time. He is a metaphor for the possibility of communion between people, as well as the embodiment of arguably the inevitable result of that inability.

The fourth category of representation of mental disability has less to do with the embodiment of the abstract than it does the expression of other characters. Rather than embodying any concept, in The Sound and the Fury and Glenway Wescott’s Apartment in Athens mentally disabled characters become both the site and motivation for other characters’ actions. They are the specific rhetorical structure for the novel to express others, whether it be in terms of ideology or action. In Barthes’ terms, they are both “cardinal functions” and “catalyzers” to the narratives, acting as “the risky moments of a narrative” as well as “say[ing] ceaselessly that there has been, that there is going to be,
Therefore Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, through both his narration as well as participation in others’ narration, enables the expression of the ideology of other characters due to their relationship with his disability. When he narrates he does not give his own commentary, instead allowing Quentin, Caddy, and others to express it through him. When he is an object in others’ narration, he becomes the stage where others are allowed to show their rage, jealousy, or pain. Therefore when Jason needs to assert his authority he is able to do so with Benjy’s body, and when Caddy must express her repentance both before and after marriage, it is through Benjy’s reliance on her. Other critics have called Benjy the symbol of decay for the Compson family. This is hardly incorrect, but more can be said: Benjy is the space for the decay of the Compson family to be expressed. It is through the vehicle of Benjy as a mentally disabled man that we know the Compsons.

Central to Wescott’s post-World War II novel *Apartment in Athens* is the opposition between Greek and Nazi, expressed through the competing narratives that

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serve to identify self, culture, and the course of the war. Due to her disability Leda creates the impulse for other characters to tell stories, as well as heightens the danger that rival narratives present in attempting to re-define both past and present. The narrator states of Mr. Helianos,

He was ashamed of Leda, ashamed for Leda; and he remembered things he had said about her himself, in fantasy of compassion and stoic humor, and he was ashamed of every word. No, no, not ashamed; for he had spoken only in secret, to himself and alter ego, his wife, in interpretation to himself of this latest poorest fruit of their lives, remnant of their old marriage; and Leda belonged to them, to interpret as they liked.38

Leda’s silence allows her to do what no other character who is depicted with psychological realism can: embody the very idea of story. Therefore, to understand her role is to understand other characters’ relationship to

38 Glenway Wescott, Apartment in Athens (New York: New York Review, 2004), 83. All further references to this edition are given in the text.
the corrupting and redeeming power of narrative in general.

Mental Disability and the Texts

The insistence on understanding the representation of mental disability as a literary act with literary consequences does not exclude concern for the cultural consequences of these representations. In their conclusion to Cultural Locations of Disability, Snyder and Mitchell state,

Because most people have the majority of their interactions with disability through written and visual materials, the analysis of this domain can provide significant interventions into the public representation of bodily, sensory, and cognitive difference. While such an analysis often entails exposing debilitating depictions, this cultural work is necessary and even paramount to influencing the ideological agenda of disability.\(^{39}\)

\(^{39}\) David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Cultural Locations of Disability (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 201.
Concentration on the textual world should not assume an ignorance of the broader culture. Wayne Booth’s thesis about aesthetics is vital here: “the author’s judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. Whether its particular forms are harmful or serviceable is always a complex question, a question that cannot be settled by any easy reference to abstract rules.” For those who seek a political agenda through the following analysis of representations of the mentally disabled, it is available to them. But first that representation must be fully understood within the discourse of the novel, otherwise we risk abusing the literary work due to our own shallow analysis while in pursuit of positive social change. This study does not attempt to explain how positive social change can or should occur due to our reading of these or any other texts. But if what Snyder and Mitchell state is true, that the majority of us encounter the disabled through the text, then studies like this must be the first step to any social change inspired by narrative.

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It is perhaps an odd choice to begin this study with a text that does not have any major character who can remotely be defined as mentally disabled. While John Sandal, a minor character in the text, will be discussed toward the end of this chapter, the importance of Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* is not due to a single character but a single, pervasive fear. The novel tells the story of Melmoth, a shadowy figure whose Faustian bargain has given him 150 years of additional mortal life that must end in damnation, though only if he cannot find another to take his place. Melmoth’s story is ultimately told through others’ nested narratives, and the novel takes on the form of a vortex as one tale of misery and isolation—the primary narrative of Melmoth’s ancestor learning of his identity, the embedded narrative of Stanton who must endure the temptation of the damned while unfairly imprisoned in an asylum, or the narrative of Monçada, the Spaniard who must escape from a hellish Catholic monastery, all among others—leads to another
like a demonic 1001 Arabian Nights. Overwhelmingly considered a classic of Gothic fiction, the novel’s motifs of imprisonment and loss of reason have become standard characteristics of the genre. For this reason the text proves to be a perfect beginning point for this study; rather than express mental disability in the dimensions and functions of an individual character, Melmoth reflects an almost “standard” Gothic horror toward the mentally disabled. The Gothic representation of both insanity and mental disability is due to the genre’s obsession with representing the panic and horror that comes from the threat of loss of reason. It is no coincidence that the other texts in this study with the most overt Gothic tendencies—Moby-Dick, The Idiot, and Flowers for Algernon—involves characters who become mentally disabled. While these Gothic novels may express different causes for the loss of cognitive ability, they still share a general abhorrence of mental disability due to the urgent possibility of becoming disabled. In texts such as The Sound and the Fury and The Secret Agent, mental disability exists as a static dimension of a single character. In the Gothic world, however, mental disability looms like a plague, and characters fear it in
a more overt way than other texts precisely because, under the right circumstances, they too could become mentally disabled. The use of mental disability in *Melmoth* is in no way connected to communicating a truth about the real-world referent of mental disability; instead, mental disability is, apart from eternal damnation (and even this, as seen below, is debatable), the most horrifying state for any human being. Mental disability here is not the Romantic idea where mental derangement might lead to "enlargement of perception and understanding for the persona or character."¹ There is no trace of other early 19ᵗʰ century portraits of mental disability that strive for sympathetic or pastoral versions.² Mental disability in Maturin’s novel is a


² For instance, Davie the servant from Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, a book published six years (1814) before *Melmoth*: "'He is an innocent, sir,' said the butler; 'there is one such in almost every town in the country, but ours is brought far ben. He used to work a day's turn weel enough; but he helped Miss Rose when she was flemit with the Laird of Killancureit’s new English bull, and since that time we ca' him Davie Do-little; indeed we might ca’ him Davie Do-naething, for since he got that gay clothing, to please his honour and my young mistress (great folks will have their fancies), he has done naething but dance up and down about the toun, without doing a single turn, unless trimming the laird’s fishing-wand or busking his flies, or may be catching a dish of trouts at an orra time.’...In the meanwhile it may be noticed, that Waverley learned two things from this colloquy: that in Scotland a single house was called a TOWN, and a natural fool an INNOCENT."
tool inspired by and inspiring horror. It is a dehumanized, permanent hollowness that manifests itself in empty mimicry. This vacuousness of mental disability therefore becomes the perfect weapon of the tyrants that pervade the novel, as it is not only the threat that comes with imprisonment due to freethinking and disobedience, but after this threat is carried out and the victim becomes mentally disabled, its emptiness is converted by those same forces into the docile obedience that the victims initially attempted to avoid. It is the obsessive fear of incarceration lived indefinitely within the mind, and externally read as submission to tyranny.

In David Punter’s *Literature of Terror*, he describes the fear within *Melmoth* to be “the terror of being regarded as mad, the longing for communication in moments of stress.” It is important to note that Punter uses the word “mad” rather than “idiocy.” These words are not synonymous, nor were they at the time Maturin was writing. How Punter means the term is certainly open to interpretation, but it is necessary before any discussion of the novel begins to understand the language.

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surrounding mental disability at the time Maturin wrote. This is especially true in regards to a novel written before the 1840’s when the movement toward educating the mentally disabled created a theoretically precise vocabulary to describe them. There is certainly some flexibility between the language of insanity and mental disability, and no claims could be made that the terms operate in completely different categories. As Martin Halliwell states, at times both terms are for “medical classification and social dysfunction, but also a general way of describing idiosyncratic, bizarre or outlandish behaviour that defies strict categorization.”\(^4\) It is nevertheless possible to evaluate the difference between the two in regards to the rhetoric contemporary with Melmoth, so that this discussion remains more precisely centered around mental disability, rather than a broader mental impairment that would necessarily include insanity. Given the Gothic tendencies of other texts in this study, as well as Maturin’s influence on Dostoevsky and Melville, such considerations of contemporary rhetoric prove useful not only for understanding the

\(^4\) Martin Halliwell, Images of Idiocy (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 4.
representation of mental disability in this chapter but in those that follow.

Some critics have argued that in nineteenth century literature the separation between insanity and mental disability is vague, and that the language they operate in is nearly identical. In her study on the subject, Hilary Dickinson states, “Many early modern representations did not, unlike novels of the second half of the nineteenth century, distinguish between mental disability and madness, and when mental disability was distinguished it was portrayed as absence of reason and therefore not worthy of attention.”\(^5\) If this statement is true, it is only as true as the texts chosen indicate. Dickinson’s study of early nineteenth century novels is limited to four, and she therefore cannot (and does not) make the claim that authors of Maturin’s time were therefore unaware of a difference between the two. Instead, it implies only that in the texts selected the language of mental disability is synonymous with the language of insanity. In more detailed records of psychiatry and medicine during Maturin’s time it is clear

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that there was (and had been) a distinct understanding of the difference between mental disability and insanity.\textsuperscript{6} It is also clear after evaluating the language in \textit{Melmoth}, that Maturin was well aware of the difference and used his language accordingly.

In his study of mental disability in Britain, Jonathan Andrews writes that since the 17\textsuperscript{th} century the difference between mental disability and madness was commonly understood: "Mental disability...was recognized as a relatively fixed, or constant deficiency, in distinction to madness, which was comprehended as a passing, changeable phase, punctuated often by intervals of sanity."\textsuperscript{7} Andrews admits there are at times ambiguities between the two, or an overlapping of rhetoric, and certainly this is the case in \textit{Melmoth} as well (especially in insult and mockery). Nevertheless, the distinction between the "classes" was nothing new by the nineteenth century. Asylums in both England and Ireland recognized these differences, and would not accept the mentally disabled as wards. The reasoning was

\textsuperscript{6} That is, according to contemporary theories of both.
simply that the insane could improve, and therefore would benefit from their institutionalization, whereas the mentally disabled were “unfit for therapy and incarceration because untreated and harmless.”

It must be remembered that 1820 is still before the time of Edouard Seguin and others popularized the idea of “treating” or educating idiots.

Lest it is assumed that Maturin learned the understood difference between mental disability and madness and used it in Melmoth, it is necessary to apply some kind of test to the text. The most straightforward and reasonable manner of doing this is to look at the language of the madhouse in the novel. In Stanton’s narrative, from the time he enters the asylum and is harassed by Melmoth until the time he is released, some derivative of the term “madness” is used fourteen times. A form of the word “insane” is used five times. Despite its usage later in the novel, the term “idiot” and its derivatives are never used in this section (though “idiocy” is used twelve times in the text). Those who

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8 Ibid, 66.
are locked in the asylum may very well never recover—and this seems to be the suggestion about nearly all of them, heightening the terror—but there is the possibility of recovery. While readers may believe that Stanton somehow bribes his guards or escapes at night from the asylum, the understanding of insanity at the time provides the opportunity for him to “recover.”

To be clear, this is not to state that there is no overlap between insanity and mental disability, nor is it to render madness in the novel as meaningless. It is, however, to state that since Maturin uses the terms separately and consistently within the text, it is valid to look at mental disability as a condition separate from insanity (though not necessarily unrelated to it). Understanding this separation not only makes sense of how fears of insanity are used within the novel, it also makes clearer what mental disability represents in the novel: if madness is a prison a person must fear, then mental disability is that prison rendered permanently, if not eternally, inescapable.
Insanity in *Melmoth*

In a text where the reader is continually plunged into new narratives whose asymmetrical structure keeps the reader off-balance as to where such narratives are leading, it is fitting that the characters are consistently worried about their loss of reason. How these characters both lose and regain their sanity is worth examination because it contributes in identifying the more extreme fear of the permanent loss of reason: that is, mental disability. The very nature of what can be lost but later won speaks to what the fear of mental disability represents in the novel.

Insanity in this novel is nearly always caused by other people. While certainly Stanton meets some in the asylum who do not fit this model (the hysterical mother, for one), all of the protagonists fear insanity not because of natural circumstance but because it is punishment. Stanton is not in the asylum for the benefit of his own health, or even to somehow ensnare Melmoth in a trap. The writer of his narrative states, “Stanton’s next relative, a needy unprincipled man, watched the report in its circulation, and saw the snares closing
round his victim” (45). Stanton is (easily) imprisoned not because of natural circumstance or a misguided concern by his family, but as punishment due to a relative’s greed. In the Spaniard’s tale, Monçada does not slip into insanity from contemplating his mother’s disgrace or even his brother’s death, but from the torture he endures from the Superior and the other monks. Even the narrative embedded in the Spaniard’s tale, the story of the Walbergs, shows the family suffering from the psychic tolls of starvation due to circumstances not from drought or personal failure, but the ostracizing torment of the Catholic world surrounding them in Spain.

The fear of insanity therefore, is always a fear with a face. It is personal rather than circumstantial, so that the power and intimidation of the authorities extends beyond the fears of death during imprisonment to the loss of reason as well.

If the fear of insanity is always given a face, its means of execution are nevertheless always physical. Stanton is not simply coaxed toward insanity by Melmoth; his body must undergo extreme distress. Melmoth seems to recognize this when in the asylum he tells Stanton, “Supposing your reason was unimpaired, your health was
not destroyed” (56). The loss of reason is attached to physical deterioration. Monçada’s physical stresses are too numerous to mention, but even those attacks by the monks that are most emotional in nature—the shunning, for instance—are attached to physical deprivation such as loss of food (when the cook gives him only scraps with hair and dust) and sleep (when his bed is taken away). Walberg’s family most overtly suffers from physical circumstances. It is the starvation that his children already endure that prompts Walberg to murder his children after being ostracized by the Catholics.

Insanity occurs then through personal malevolence, and seemingly must be accompanied by physical, rather than simply emotional or mental distress. There is no fear of insanity from the death of a loved one (except in the case of “The Lovers’ Tale,” which will be addressed later), but from a specific tormentor who acts on the body. It is possible, however, to struggle against this persecution and win. Sanity in Melmoth is fluid as Jonathan Andrews’ study on mental disability suggests, so that a person can become insane and then recover should the physical circumstances they were forced to endure alleviate. The truth of this can be found in the lie of
Melmoth to Stanton, who must drive his prisoner to despair by making him believe that sanity is not a fight one is able to win: “A time will come, and soon, when, from mere habit, you will echo the scream of every delirious wretch that harbours near you; then you will pause, clasp your hands on your throbbing head, and listen with horrible anxiety whether the scream proceeds from you or them” (56). Of course, Stanton refuses to believe him and indeed does fight for his sanity. Although the means of his release are conveniently vague, we know that Stanton wins this fight to retain his sanity. This struggle is repeated in Juan’s letter to Monçada, when he reports that due to “mental debility” he is unable to control his contempt and becomes violent toward the Director, all until there is a “recovery of [his] intellect” (124). Monçada himself, of course, is constantly struggling to maintain his own sanity, perhaps never more so after the death of Juan when he is imprisoned by the Inquisition. The language of Monçada reveals the struggle to maintain reason, but also the agency that is requisite for a successful attempt. Only in strength (and it should be remembered when Juan loses strength he fails and gets a fever that causes him to be
imprisoned) can reason be regained. Even when Monçada
states that he “totally lost [his] reason,” he is able to
regain it. The mind that has lost its reason therefore,
is never fully lost. Monçada experiences the “sleep of a
recovered maniac” (218), so that his “intellect is but
just respiring” (219). This new respiration after trauma
is due to Monçada’s strength, as is clear when he states,
“I summoned all the remains of my intellect” so that a
week later he has maintained “the preservation of [his]
reason.” Walberg, however, does not have the strength to
hold onto his reason, and only the swooning of his
daughters and the cleverness of his son is enough to keep
him from murdering them.

Insanity then is like the dungeon of Monçada’s
convent. When a victim is forced there by other people,
it throws the victim into utter darkness so that the
boundaries surrounding him cannot be fully understood,
and communication with the outside is minimal and
overwhelmingly negative. Also like Monçada’s convent, it
is escapable. While the lovers who are cast into the
dungeon are consumed by its horror, Monçada and his
brothers-in-suffering Stanton and Walberg are able to
escape. Certainly then, the fear of insanity is a legitimate fear, especially as it is necessarily coupled by the presence of a tyrannical authority who torments the entire person, including the body. Nevertheless insanity is escapable as shown by the different protagonists, even when, as Monçada often says he does, one completely succumbs to it. There is another fear in Melmoth, however, that is permanent and inescapable by nature. The fear of mental disability is a fear of the ultimate kind of madness, when the intellect can never be restored.

Mental Disability in Melmoth

Mental disability is not divorced from insanity in the novel, and the fear it creates operates in similar ways. Like insanity, it is nearly always feared from horrid physical circumstances (there is never a regard to congenital mental disability). People become idiots when

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10 Immalee does not survive her personal dungeon, but she is never worried about insanity like the others. The imprisonment of insanity is what is imminently escapable, not the general imprisonment from the Inquisition.
under duress; to be more specific, when they experience extreme horror.

Although the fears of insanity and mental disability are pervasive in *Melmoth*, only the fear of mental disability is readily associated with the reaction to absolute horror. Gothic writers and critics alike have discriminated between the qualities of terror and horror. Terror does not leave the victim paralyzed. Escapes and solutions are sought when one encounters terror, even leading to the possibility of an experience with the sublime. Steven Bruhm, using some of Radcliffe’s words to distinguish between the two concepts, states, “Terror, then, is that carefully regulated aesthetic experience that can use intense feeling to seek objects in the world, objects which can include people in distress.”¹¹

Horror, however, operates in a more wholly insidious way. In the words of David Punter, horror “requires you to stand aghast, it proclaims the impossibility of any action as the monster crawls towards you down the tunnel.”¹² Mental disability in *Melmoth* is what happens

once the victim realizes there is an "impossibility of action." For instance, when Monçada is forced to listen to the ravings of the parricide’s dreams, he states, “I cannot sustain your horrible eloquence of sleep. If I am forced to listen to it again, you may bear me alive from these walls, but you will bear me away an idiot, stupified by terrors which my brain is unable to support” (201-2). Monçada explains the impossibility of his circumstances. He must endure the ravings, but these ravings will permanently destroy him. The sensible mind cannot resist forever the insensibilities of evil, and the creation of mental disability threatens. Amy Smith writes that Maturin has a “fascination with the degenerative psychological states resulting from his experiments in human suffering.”

Here, for Monçada, that inevitable psychological state is mental disability. Monçada again experiences the horror of "impossibility of action" when he hides from the monks with Ben-Solomon, and his reaction goes even further than his previous warning to the parricide about inevitable mental disability. When he sees that same parricide

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13 Amy Smith, “Experimentation and ‘Horrid Curiosity’ in Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer,” English Studies 74.6 (1993): 530.
murdered by the wild mob, mental disability again threatens Monçada. The Spaniard states after seeing the explicit torture of the parricide (which he conveys in all its detail to his audience), “The drama of terror has the irresistible power of converting its audience into its victims” (257). Mental disability then is a kind of irresistible response to experiencing an excess of horror; the only way Monçada avoids this due to witnessing the parricide’s death is through the intervention of Ben-Solomon who, despite the fugitive’s predatory comments, brings him out of the stupor. Horror creates a hypnotizing focus; the threatened cannot look away. Here Ben-Solomon saves Monçada because he is able to break Monçada’s focus away from the horror. There is no virtue or argument to combat the object of this gaze. The only way to prevent succumbing to horror and falling into mental disability is to stop witnessing it. In this case, Ben-Solomon provides that salvation for Monçada.

14 The author makes clear that mental disability rather than madness is possible as he intervenes to specifically tell the reader a similar story, one that results in mental disability.

15 Maturin himself, of course, does not follow the more general distinction between terror and horror. Nevertheless, his explanation of Monçada’s fear is essentially how Gothic writers and critics understand horror. Bruhm states, “the horrified spectator [must] enclose and protect the self” (37). As is the case in these examples with Monçada, however, he cannot protect the self. He must spectate, and the result of this gaze is a permanent mental disability.
If mental disability is a physiological response to an overload of horror, its condition is itself horrifying both to the victim and the reader because of its permanency. Here it differs from the insanity that threatens the protagonists at other times. Unlike when Monçada loses his reason during his imprisonment or when Stanton and Walberg feel themselves slipping into madness, a descent into mental disability is, as the text shows, characteristically horrifying in its irreversibility. When Monçada nurses the sick monks, he is shocked at the words of the dying monk who earlier tried to convince him of the miracle of the garden tree. When the monk speaks honestly of the monastic life, he tells Monçada of the desperation a monk has to escape (something Monçada already fully comprehends):

Then they take refuge in the possibility of a fire....At this thought they conceive the most ardent hope,—they could rush out,—they could precipitate themselves into the streets, into the country,—in fact, they would fly any where to escape. (116)
The hope these monks have is utterly fruitless (also something Monçada already knows), and with the loss of hope for change comes the language of mental disability:

Then these hopes fail,—they begin to get nervous, morbid, restless. If they have interest, they are indulged with remission from their duties, and they remain in their cells, relaxed,—torpid,—idiotical; if they have not interest, they are forced to the punctual performance of their duties, and then idiotism comes on much sooner, as diseased horses, employed in a mill, become blind sooner than those who are suffered to wear out existence in ordinary labour. (116)

The dying monk’s description of the idiot is of a stagnant man no longer capable even of the hysterical ravings of Stanton’s asylum. Even more important, however, is the language of irreversibility. Once the hopes for change are crushed, mental disability begins, and the seemingly appropriate analogy is of a “diseased horse” who becomes “blind” and is speeded to a worn-out existence.
Monçada’s response is to “rush from the infirmary.” Not only is he shocked at the absence of faith from one he assumed not only faithful but gentle, he is also terrified at both the inevitability of the monk’s vision as well as the inescapability of it. The dying monk’s vision ends in only one way: “[The monks] crawl to their cells,—in a few days the toll of the bell is heard and the brethren exclaim, ‘He died in the odour of sanctity,’ and hasten to spread their snares for another victim” (117).

The dying monk’s vision of his monastic brothers’ lives is not coincidentally tied to prisoners of the Inquisition, so that both the heretics and orthodox are punished alike under the tyranny of Catholicism. When Monçada sees the victims of an auto da fe in the light of the burning prison, he says, “Idiots from long confinement, and submissive as the holy office could require” (241). The idiot-victims are described nearly identical to the idiot-monks of Monçada’s dying confessor, the primary characteristics being a mindless obsession with the repetition of the various images of their unquestionably broken minds: “Some invoked [the flames] as saints. They dreamt they saw the visions they
had worshipped, —the holy angels, and even the blessed
virgin, descending in flames to receive their souls as
parting from the stake” (242). This is one of the few
moments in the novel when the idiot is given the power of
speech. It is certainly not a kind of miraculous
positive, however, since the speech acts are nonsensical
given the context of their personal safety and the
reality of what they’re witnessing. Because the
Inquisition was willing to persecute both real and
imagined heretics, either the idiots display a perversion
of a once-true faith (echoes of the Puritan madman in
Stanton’s prison), or, if they were true heretics,
display the submissiveness that figures such as the
Superior demand and mental disability helps create.

The dying monk’s vision stays with Monçada as he can
feel the process the anathema predicted when he is cast
into the dungeon. Living the torpid life rather than
raving in hysterics, Monçada attempts to keep time by
counting the seconds in his head. Such a life of
repetition and endlessness leads him to state, “Had I led

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16 This passage states the idiots see their visions and make their
“hallelujahs half in horror, half in hope.” This is hardly the same
hope of Stanton in the madhouse, however. The hope here is not for
recovery from mental disability, but actually an indulgence of their
mental disability, so that the only hope an idiot can have is as
misdirected as their reason.
this life much longer, I might have been converted into the idiot, who, as I have read, from the habit of watching a clock, imitated its mechanism so well, that when it was down, he sounded the hour as faithfully as ear could desire. Such was my life” (147). This portrait of the idiot not only replicates the dying monk’s formula for what becomes of his brothers, it also has the element of dehumanization as well. This time instead of a diseased horse who is blind until death, the idiot becomes a kind of breathing clock whose impairment serves him to be a dehumanized, consistent machine. Both metaphors for the idiot are powerful as throughout the book “the horror of an event is in inverse proportion to its naturalness.”\(^\text{17}\) The more de-humanized the idiot becomes, and the more freakish their mental and physical state, then the more the idiot is to be feared as a threat to the normal person.

It is perhaps puzzling that when Monçada tells about slowly becoming an idiot in the dungeon there is no horror in his voice. While this very well may be a case of Maturin inserting himself into the narrator (and thus

Monçada’s emotion disappears), one assumes that Monçada had this idea of becoming an idiot after his imprisonment when he has physically recovered and is in safety. At the time of his imprisonment he states that for all its horrors, it was at least comparable to the life he lived above: “To be fighting with reptiles in the dark appears the most horrible struggle that can be assigned to man; but what is it compared to his combat with those reptiles which his own heart hourly engenders in a cell” (146). At the time of his imprisonment, Monçada is performing the very process that the dying monk said would happen, though certainly under more horrible conditions. But the fear of mental disability can never take too much hold because hope is never extinguished from Monçada. With the daily arrival of the monk who visits him, there is a slight hope of escape, so that the attending monk “felt a repugnance at delivering an intimation of hope” (147).

Lest the reader believe that mental disability, like insanity, is a repairable state once a period of horror is over, the author inserts himself during the Spaniard’s tale in order to relate an anecdote. This anecdote is similar to Maturin’s previous authorial intrusions, which consist of clarifying references or providing context to
dramatic and diabolical situations. Maturin attempts to convince the reader of the plausibility of Monçada’s reaction by affirming the reality of horror inducing mental disability, as well as mental disability being permanent and characterized by mimicry: a shoemaker, upon seeing a man nailed to a door with pikes, is driven to mental disability by the horror of the scene. The amount of space given to the author’s footnote is noteworthy, as well as his determination to ground the anecdote about the idiot in both time and space. Maturin proves as explicit a narrator as Monçada as he accentuates the number of pikes and the pain they caused. The importance here is that even in the footnote Maturin is doing more than simply relating a gruesome yarn. Even as author he tries to inspire fear and horror in his audience, and the result of such fear and horror is mental disability. For the reader, there is no escape from the torture caused by human depravity, nor is the fear of mental disability escapable: it is not a fabricated condition for a fabricated world, but a true response that the reader must beware. And the response’s duration is emphasized with the condition, as Maturin puts the final, terrifying phrase in italics: “The man stood at his window as if
nailed to it; and when dragged from it, became—an idiot for life” (257).

It should not be surprising then that in a book in which mental disability is both the result of horror and horrifying itself there is no character who is a congenital idiot. Mental disability here is a condition to be acquired and never lost; Jonathan Andrews states that there existed “other conceptions of mental disability as a state acquired subsequently, through accident or disease” (66). In Melmoth, of course, this should be amended to “through horror,” and the text does provide us such a character. John Sandal essentially becomes an idiot after the death of his wife, and an examination of his case shows that the previous characteristics of the condition all exist.

Sandal does not become an idiot simply because his wife dies. In fact, his despair is not even described as the most intense; such an award goes to the Widow Sandal, whose machinations have now failed. What causes Sandal’s mental disability is the “horrible confession” he must endure by his wife’s bed. Certainly, this is a different type of horror that Monçada endures, but it is not necessarily less extreme. Monçada fears becoming an
idiot from hearing the parricide’s confession, and here Sandal does become an idiot due to a “horrible confession.” Melmoth the narrator states that after pushing his mother away, “the light of reason was extinguished for ever! [italics added]” (493).

As a narrator Melmoth is true to his word as Sandal never does recover his intellect. Sandal is not insane: he is not given to ravings and illogic, but instead he is one who “no longer thinks, and seldom speaks” (501). Elinor’s triumph is that Sandal, whose life is limited to silent walks and whose mental disability is so severe that he no longer even recognizes Elinor, shows human emotion by crying a little on her shoulder and looking at her with awareness. He, of course, does not “recover” any further, and the joy Elinor feels is less in his return to a recognizable state than in the fact that her love, on some basic level, is finally returned again. The state Sandal is in, except for his final redemptive moment that quickly passes into death, is so utterly debased of individual thought that his caretaker accepts tears and a glance as a triumphant, reciprocated love. Throughout the latter stages of the novel’s arguably most pedestrian story, mental disability is the unmovable
condition that separates. Here with Sandal it is the
extreme form of what the dying monk confessed and Monçada
feared and teetered at the edge of: a loss of humanity.
Whereas the insane of Stanton’s prison are trapped in
their insanity much like their bodies are trapped in the
cell, mental disability turns the mind into a prison cell
with no one inside. It is nothing but walls; the
contents have long been removed. It is irreversible
because it is humanity vacated.

The Use of Mental Disability

Mental disability is never the textual presence that
insanity is, but its use in the novel nevertheless has a
narratological purpose, as it provides both the cause and
consequence for Maturin’s ideas of horror and tyranny to
be expressed. Mental disability becomes the ultimate
tool of the tyrants as a weapon not only for destroying
the self, but for re-structuring a more submissive
person. Of course, if mental disability is the tool of
the tyrants to create obedience, it can be more
accurately described as the tool of the Catholic church:
“the antithesis of Christianity in this novel is
represented not by Melmoth, but by a parricide and lay-brother among the ex-jesuits” (73). Throughout the novel it is the Catholic faith that seeks to create the mentally disabled not only because there is punishment, but because this seemingly how faithful Catholics can be created. As expressed in the dying monk’s words and echoed in the submissiveness of the auto da fe victims worshipping the flames, mental disability deprives the rebellious and heretical of their very means of resistance to tyranny, while turning them pliable subjects of the Catholic church. Upon the onset of mental disability the monks mimic their surroundings as sure as the story of Monçada hearing that the idiot mimics the clock. The monastery’s Superior’s most loyal monks, the four who most abuse Monçada, are described as “men who are elected to take part with the Superior, on supposition of their utter, superannuated incapacity, as Pope Sixtus was elected for his (supposed) imbecility [italics added]” (105). Mimicry, or perhaps better stated in this context as obedience, is the shape these Catholic tyrants of the novel try to pound their

respective rebels into. Mental disability and inducing it through horrifying physical conditions become punishment as well as perverse tools for evangelism.

If mental disability is the ally of tyrants, a tool to bring about submissive mimicry of the status quo, then the reverse is true as well: it is also an enemy of the freethinking who hope to resist against the oppression. Enough attention has already been paid to Monçada’s fear of mental disability and what it will produce in him, but it should be understood that because of mental disability’s positioning it has a binary opposite: thought. At one point in the novel Melmoth finds an abandoned woman named Immalee lost on a tropic island, unaware of the world’s wisdom and dependent upon Melmoth for an education. Immalee, at her most Edenic and admirable, is firm in her belief that thought is what is most admirable about humanity. In “The Indian’s Tale” thought is directly associated with immortality, so that Immalee states, pondering the idea of everlasting life, “perhaps what thinks may live too after the form has faded, and that is a thought of joy” (286). This is not to suggest that everything Immalee states in her paradise is truth, as much of it comes from naïveté (or a
misunderstanding of “soul”). The very fact, however, that here the language of a person’s immortality is connected with a person’s intellect cannot be missed. Mental disability, as the emptying of a person’s most basic thought for the mechanical behavior of an automaton provides an obvious opposite to this, so that the idiot not only becomes the favorite child of the oppressive, but the eternal fear of the thoughtful.

After learning more about the world, Immalee apparently steps back from idealizing thought when she states, “I begin to comprehend what he said— to think, then, is to suffer,” but this idea is continued so that even the suffering that thought would bring is beautiful: “a world of thought must be a world of pain! But how delicious are these tears! Formerly I wept for pleasure—but there is a pain sweeter than pleasure, that I never felt till I beheld him. Oh! Who would not think, to have the joy of tears?” (288). Here even love is indirectly associated with thought so that those who are incapable of thought are incapable of love. Or as is experienced at other times in the book, those who lose love descend into mental disability or madness: the bridegroom at the Spanish wedding becomes an “unhappy
maniac" who "never recovers his reason" (36), and Sandal, of course, never recovers once he realizes not only that his love is dead, but that his first love had been deceitfully taken from him.¹⁹

Therefore on the side of those who resist tyranny and attempt to love despite prejudice are the predominance of thought and the noble resistance against unfair hierarchies. On the other is the Superior and Widow Stanton, who in order to create obedience to their own wills create the conditions for their inferiors to be confronted by horror, and in the confrontation their most base human desires are broken, their very humanity vacated.

Mental disability not only threatens specific characters with a permanent dysfunction, it also threatens the novel as a whole. If Monçada or Stanton become disabled due to horror, the novel itself cannot be

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¹⁹ Sandal’s lack of recovery also suggests the constant isolation of the mentally disabled. The only life available to them is the vacuous life of the automaton. No connection with another is possible. If Melmoth tells Immalee "the lonely crowd in the city can finally be just as repulsive, estranging, and dehumanizing as the solitary confinement of the isolated self," then this state of humanity is represented in the mentally disabled: loved, isolated, within a community, they are never able to find any kind of communion with another (Hennelly 1981: 674).
told since it is narrated by the men themselves. Mental disability therefore acts as a villain to story itself, turning that potential for narrative into empty obedience and mockery. Dani Cavallaro describes the classic Gothic structure to be a “complex discovery plot” separated into four parts: “onset, discovery, confirmation, confrontation.” In Melmoth mental disability comes at the second stage, discovery, and therefore blocks the following parts. If Stanton and Monçada become mentally disabled due to the horrors they witness, there can be no confirmation of Melmoth’s identity, and more importantly no confrontation with him that ends in valiant rejection of his damnable bargain.

As countless readers and critics have noticed, Melmoth himself is not the main purveyor of evil. That role is reserved to for eminently more human tyrants who have no qualms either with killing or creating a de-humanized slave in the name of obedience. It is ironic then that Melmoth creates one of the more horrifying

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20 Stanton’s tale is read by Melmoth’s descendant, and we are never sure of the identity of the writer. If the details in the tale are to be believed, however, Stanton in some form was behind the writing.
aspects of mental disability. Speaking most directly about insanity, Melmoth nevertheless addresses the very notion of how salvation could be understood, and his conclusions create a theological backdrop which makes mental disability (and insanity) the most horrifying condition not only for freethinkers, but for all Christians as well. Still in the madhouse with Stanton, Melmoth states,

You think that the intellectual power is something distinct from the vitality of the soul, or, in other words, that if even your reason should be destroyed...your soul might yet enjoy beatitude in the full exercise of its enlarged and exalted faculties, and all the clouds which obscured them be dispelled by the Sun of Righteousness, in whose beams you hope to bask for ever and ever. (57)

He continues to describe the imprisoned, insane preacher who is both orthodox and heretic, and whose true belief is obscured by his mental degradation, therefore making him damned for all eternity. Dale Kramer, a biographer of Maturin, gives little attention to Melmoth’s words,
calling them a “sophistical argument.”\textsuperscript{22} To be sure, there is no way of knowing whether Melmoth is simply deceiving in order to get the soul or stating a spiritual truth. What is even more terrifying would be both: that such an argument helps make Stanton even more fearful, and the idea is true that mental disability has the power to make a right believer’s salvation be destroyed through the loss of faith and reason. Especially given the Catholic monks’ use of mental disability to try to corrupt those who would resist the church, the possibility is more than just a “sophistical argument” by Melmoth. In the end, of course, there is no way of knowing, but what is clear is that Melmoth’s words echo a motif carried throughout the book: there is nothing more horrifying than losing one’s mind. Insanity warps the definition of the self, but even worse, mental disability wipes out the true self completely so that one is only defined by mimicry, a pasteboard mask of repetitions with nothing underneath. Perhaps even with eternal repercussions. Neither Melmoth’s victims nor Maturin’s readers can deny the possibility. Other texts such as

Moby-Dick and The Idiot may also flirt with theological implications of mental disability, yet these texts will also recognize a second “side”: the possibility that mental disability can provide transcendence. The horror of a loss of intellectual ability exists in both Melville and Dostoevsky, but at the same time mental disability carries with it great promise. In a novel like Melmoth the Wanderer, or as will be seen in Daniel Keyes’ Flowers for Algernon, this promise is unthinkable.
CHAPTER III

THE PROGRESSION FROM PITY TO HORROR IN DANIEL KEYES’S FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

If there is a tendency to assume literary representations of the mentally disabled reflect cultural representations of the mentally disabled, as well to assume that these cultural representations have improved over time (especially after pre-World War II eugenics), then Daniel Keyes’s Flowers for Algernon seems to refute both of these ideas. Although the novel doesn’t receive the academic attention other texts in this study receive, it was nevertheless a Hugo-winning science fiction novel, and arguably reaches more readers in American education than all the other books in this study combined.¹ Perhaps it is the surface, saccharine idea of the story that makes it the most “teachable” in schools: Charlie Gordon is a mentally disabled man who records his thoughts in “progress reports” as he undergoes a clinical

¹ A personal anecdote may be appropriate here. I first read an abridged version of the novel in junior high; I was not assigned any of the other texts in my high school or undergraduate education. When my undergraduate students ask me what texts I’m currently working on, they consistently shrug their shoulders at all of them besides Flowers for Algernon. They may know works by Faulkner, Melville, and Dostoevsky, but only Flowers for Algernon do they have a deep affection for.
operation to improve his intelligence. He reaches the cognitive ability of the greatest of geniuses, ironically surpassing the doctors who operated on him. But with his increased intelligence comes isolation from the woman, his former adult education teacher, that he falls in love with, as well as the realization of how poorly he was treated in his previous state. His only companion is Algernon, the mouse who preceded him in the breakthrough operation. Algernon, however, loses his gained intelligence and descends to death, and Charlie’s operation proves just as temporary; he returns to his previous disabled state. The text seemingly brims with advocacy for the mentally disabled. Charlie, after all, does not experience a better life with intelligence, and the cruelty of those to the mentally disabled is exposed. Yet as a narratological presence in the novel, the concept and performance of mental disability is not the science-fiction-spun golden rule it may seem. Although not overtly seen as a Gothic novel, the use of mental disability in Flowers for Algernon greatly resembles Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer. Throughout the text is the pervasive fear (and by the end of the novel a frenzied panic) of the horror that is the state of mental
disability. The book opens with the familiar sentimental trope of mental disability as innocence and misfortune deserving a normal person’s pity. Yet this pity is converted to horror when Charlie Gordon, once able to experience life as it is lived by the reader, is returned to his original state. In this way the progression-regression of Charlie Gordon becomes part of the science fiction trope of the created being, whether it be robot or mutant, as the means of understanding humanity. Ironically in *Flowers for Algernon*, the humanity of the transformed person is greater than the original human. In describing the use of the cyborg in science fiction literature, Robert Scholes and Erik Rabkin give a fair description of what occurs in our shift in loyalty from the previously disabled Charlie to the hyper-intelligent version:

If [cyborgs] are human, and if we’ve created them, then are we gods? Or meddling fools? Or merely ordinary people having sex by way of a test tube? The device of the android, a modern streamlining of the image of Frankenstein’s monster, brings all these issues into sharper focus. Cyborgs always serve fictionally to
question what might constitute a human

esse ne.\(^2\)

In Keyes’s novel, we are convinced that the cyborg, the transformed human of science fiction, is of human essence. Through recognition of how Charlie thinks, acts, and loves, we embrace that new created essence, thereby rejecting the previous essence. By the end of the novel it is clear that Charlie must be rescued, just as Monçada must be rescued from witnessing human cruelty so severe that he is permanently disabled by it. The impossibility of Charlie’s rescue therefore creates the novel’s tragedy, as mental disability operates as the inevitable loss of one’s humanity. As in Melmoth, mental disability is the great, permanent nothingness that both Charlie and the reader learn to fear.

The Pitiful Charlie Gordon

My use of the verb “learns” is an intentional one, as the reader’s perception of mental disability at the beginning of the novel is quite different from the horror

it is by the time Charlie writes his last progress report. Instead, the pity-inducing trope of infantilizing the mentally disabled is most obvious to the audience as the narrative opens. Charlie has not yet had the operation, but since the novel is told through Charlie’s “progress reports,” we must fill in the gaps with what we infer from what he can only vaguely suggest. The first pages of the novel, for instance, are inundated with spelling errors and obvious misconceptions. Without an intelligent narrator to give the audience an initial understanding of character or action, irony is created, and this irony produces pity for the reader. On the first page of the novel Charlie writes about meeting with Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss, the heads of the experiment: “What happind is I went to Prof Nemurs office on my lunch time like they said and his secertery took me to a place that said psych dept on the door with a long hall and alot of little rooms with onley a desk and chares.”

Charlie’s simplistic description and obvious lack of intuition immediately makes him an inadequate hero to confront whatever obstacles he may soon face.

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3 Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005), 1. All further references to this edition are given in the text.
encounter; more intelligent than Charlie, we put together that he is already being swallowed by the sophisticates behind the university walls and "little rooms." On the first page then there is an almost Kafka-esque impossibility that Charlie is about to face, yet Charlie is completely unaware of the size and power of who is about to engage with. We as readers understand, and we pity him because we know the sides are dramatically mismatched.

Charlie’s reporting of his psychological tests is a clever way for the audience to “see” his inability not through the results of the test, but through his inadequate descriptions of the test, as well as his inability to even perform within the tests. When Burt, the psychology graduate student, attempts to give him a “raw shok” test, Charlie states,

He sed pepul see things in the ink. I said show me where. He dint show me he just kept saying think imaggen theres something on the card. I tolld him I imaggen a inkblot. He shaked his head so that wasn’t rite eather...I closd my eyes for a long time to pretend and then I said I pretend a bottel of ink spilld
all over a white card. And that’s when the point on his pencil broke and then we got up and went out.(3)

Although it is possible to imagine a reader chuckling at this moment in the novel, the aesthetics of such an early encounter suggest otherwise. Charlie as a narrator is presented with no ability to imagine, which immediately presents him as a troubling, unreliable narrator. Because this unreliability is based in his mental disability rather than trickery or foolishness as in other unreliable narrators, we pity him. And because this pity is in a situation with people obviously more powerful than Charlie, we align ourselves with the frustrating subject rather than the frustrated scientist. Like so much rhetoric that surrounds the mentally disabled both in and out of literature, he is seen as a child pitted against a more powerful, insidious adult world. When Charlie begins to recover from his surgery, his initial nurse is removed from his care due to her religious qualms with the experiment. What is telling, however, is where this nurse is transferred: “They changed my nurse today...I asked her where was Hilda and she said Hilda wasn’t working in that part of the
hospitil no more. Only in the matirnity ward by the babys where it don’t matter if she talks too much” (17). Hilda, adequate to serve Charlie, is also adequate to look after newborn babies. Not only does this have consequences in later discussions about Charlie’s “re-birthing,” it also more immediately implies that Charlie is a child, looked after by those who look after children.

If seeing Charlie as a child helps induce pity in the reader, so too do the relationships that define the pre-op Charlie. Ironic due to his inability to see the cruelty of his friends and family, the reader understands Charlie to be better off alone; when he is around others, he is abused. Charlie states off-hand that his sister is “found” in order to give permission for the operation, suggesting not only is Charlie abandoned by his sister but also that he has no volition in giving permission about his own body. When Charlie first mentions his mother, he states that she told him always to pray to God, “that he shoud make me get better and not be sick. I dont remember how I was sick. I think it was about me not being smart” (19). Much like the implication about his sister, not only is his disability seen as a
mysterious sickness that obviously was never “cured” through prayer, but Charlie’s mother, in her first “appearance” to the audience, is the one who is encouraging the prayer. If Charlie’s mother understands her son’s disability, the desire for him to pray for a cure is especially cruel because he clearly does not understand his own sickness and/or body. Such moments become even more pitiful when they are coupled with vague words by Charlie about his childhood in general: “[I] remembrir things that happened a long time ago when I was a very littel kid. Its scary” (25).

Twice Charlie mentions that his motivation for the experiment is that “I just want to be smart like other pepul so I can have lots of frends who like me” (13). Clearly his family that he introduces us to did not and do not “like” him, and his oblique references to his friends at the bakery where he works make us believe that Charlie’s only working definition of friendship is outright abuse by those around him. Unable to distinguish between cruelty and compassion, Charlie’s perverted ideas of family and friendship make him a hapless David in a world of Goliaths. The only true friendship Charlie seems to have at the beginning of the
novel is with his rival-in-science Algernon, the mouse who preceded him in the experiment. Even Charlie’s friendship with Algernon is itself based on pity; he fears for the mouse’s mistreatment at the hands of the scientists when he learns that Algernon only receives food when he successfully completes the maze: “I don’t think it’s right to make you pass a test to eat. How would Burt like to have to pass a test every time he wants to eat. I think I’ll be friends with Algernon” (32). Even Charlie’s acts of unselfishness are pathetic because they are echoes of his own fears and mistreatment.

Establishing this feeling of complete pity for Charlie is necessary as it provides the backdrop for the post-op Charlie who becomes hyper-intelligent and hyper-aware of both his current state as budding genius as well as his former state of pathetic disabled man. The continual cultural ubiquity of the novel may rest in the fact that when Charlie becomes intelligent he seemingly becomes an arrogant, selfish burden to those around him. This creates a quaint appreciation for the mentally disabled, as even though they are naïve, such ignorance is preferable to the pompous narcissists in academia. This homely appreciation is short-lived, however, as we
soon shift our allegiance to the hyper-intelligent Charlie who must rage against those who “created” him, as well as time that is reducing him back to being mentally disabled. Implicit in this, of course, is that the mentally disabled Charlie of the beginning of the novel is not the mentally disabled Charlie at the end of the novel. The first version the reader pitied as powerless but good. After experiencing a heroic Charlie struggling against fate, that initial pity is transformed into horror. Daniel Keyes himself suggests as much when he recounts the story of the book’s publication in his memoir *Algernon, Charlie and I*. Describing the problems with editors who demanded a happy ending to the story:

Finally, [the editor] came out of his office, deep in thought, and sat across from me.

“Dan, this is a good story. But I’m going to suggest a few changes that will turn it into a great story….Charlie doesn’t regress. He doesn’t lose his intelligence. Instead, he remains a supergenius, marries Alice Kinnian, and they live happily ever after. That would make it a great story.”
I stared at him. How does a beginning writer respond to the editor who bought one story from him, and wants to buy a second? The years of labor over this story passed through my mind. What about my Wedge of Loneliness? My tragic vision of Book Mountain? My challenge to Aristotle’s theory of The Classic Fall?  

My suggestion here is not that the book would be better with this proposed ending. Instead, that Keyes himself recognizes that Charlie’s regression, despite the fact that he merely returns to his original state, is a source of tragedy. This only occurs if the Charlie that induces pity in the reader diminishes with the hyper-intelligent Charlie we admire, so even though he returns to his initial intelligence, we understand him to be subsumed into an existence without consciousness; at least rhetorically, Charlie Gordon dies.

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4 Daniel Keyes, Algernon, Charlie and I (Boca Raton, FL: Challenge Press, 1999), 110-1.
The Better Charlie Gordon

Part of the “moral” of *Flowers for Algernon* is that Charlie, despite his increased intelligence, never becomes a better person. Although his intelligence improves, Charlie as a person does not; rather than simply becoming hyper-intelligent, he also becomes cruel and selfish. This is pointed out to Charlie by nearly all those around him: the doctors involved in the experiment, Burt the graduate student, Charlie’s love Alice, and Charlie’s casual partner Faye. This alleged brutishness by Charlie is necessary if readers of the novel are going to see some kind of moral to the story. If Charlie actually improves by all definitions of what it means to be a better human being (morally, physically, intellectually, etc.), then the novel cannot possibly signify the humanity of the mentally disabled. Problematic, however, is that although Charlie is accused many times of being arrogant and selfish, whether he is or not is questionable. In fact, Charlie seems to be most compassionate and aware, both of himself and others, when he is intelligent. The text therefore moves us from
pitying the mentally disabled Charlie to sympathizing and morally aligning ourselves with the intelligent Charlie.

As Charlie becomes closer with his former teacher Alice, he decides to visit her in what is his former classroom at the “Center for Retarded Adults.” Since Charlie’s speech and carriage is now vastly different from when he attended the class, when he steps inside the other students notice the difference. Alice suspends the class and when she shows her anger to Charlie, he asks her what is wrong:

“Nothing—nothing’s bothering me.”

“Come on. Your anger is all out of proportion to what’s happened. Something’s on your mind.”

She slammed down a book she was holding.

“All right. You want to know? You’re different. You’ve changed. And I’m not talking about your I.Q. It’s your attitude toward people—you’re not the same kind of human being...I mean it. There was something in you before. I don’t know...a warmth, an openness, a kindness that made everyone like you and like to have you around.” (122)
This is problematic for two reasons. First, in this scene we have not seen Charlie act cruel toward his old classmates. He admits to his faux pas of walking into the classroom, and states he is not sure why he did. But when the students interact with him he is in no way cruel. He waves at those who wave to him, and when asked if he is coming back he explains, “This is just a visit;” the motivation for the lie is his rhetorical question, “What could I tell them that would not hurt them?” (121). Charlie may have done a foolish thing by going back to the classroom, but he admits his wrong, and in no way validates Alice’s opinion of him. In fact, he seems to be perfectly aware of how his behavior might affect the other students. The second reason why Alice’s anger is inaccurate is that we have seen that Charlie’s friendships with others before the operation cannot be wholly categorized as a result of “a kindness that made everyone like you and like to have you around.” The men at the bakery only pretend to befriend him in order to mock him both privately and publically, and Charlie himself points this out to Alice: “Did you think I’d remain a docile pup, wagging my tail and licking the foot that kicks me?...I no longer have to take the kind of
crap that people have been handing me all my life” (123). Alice’s credibility is even more compromised when she states, “People have not been bad to you.” As earlier established, his mistreatment by friends and family characterized Charlie before his operation. The entire scene then, rather than make Charlie into an arrogant, selfish man, shows him to be sympathetic and self-aware. His judgment, rather than that of Alice, becomes more trustworthy.

Other characters besides Alice call Charlie both arrogant and selfish, including the head of the experiment Professor Nemur, who becomes a rival as Charlie becomes more intelligent. At the science conference where both Charlie and Algernon are to perform their changes, Charlie proves himself a more capable scholar than Nemur, embarrassing his “master” and driving Charlie away from the university. When Nemur and Charlie finally have an explosive argument, Nemur states, “You’re feeling sorry for yourself. What did you expect? This experiment was calculated to raise your intelligence, not to make you popular. We had no control over what happened to your personality, and you’ve developed from a likeable, retarded young man into an arrogant, self-
centered, antisocial bastard” (247). Like Alice, Nemur’s
criticism of Charlie is that he is now less likeable than
before than as a docile mentally disabled man. And like
Alice, Nemur also makes dubious statements about
That’s all this opportunity has meant to you. Your
genius has destroyed your faith in the world and in your
fellow men” (249). It is a specious argument by Nemur,
one that has no proof in the novel. As in his argument
with Alice, Charlie gets the upper hand in the argument,
stating, “You look shocked! Yes, suddenly we dis
cover that I was always a person—even before—and that
challenges your belief that someone with an I.Q. of less
than 100 doesn’t deserve consideration” (248). If he is
arrogant and antisocial like Alice and Nemur claim, they
nevertheless are unable to address Charlie’s own
realizations.

Even when Charlie becomes belligerent it is only
indirectly for his own benefit. When Algernon is on
display at the science conference Charlie steals him, not
only to revenge himself against the scientists, but
because he sees Algernon as misrepresented and
misunderstood. When he dines alone in a restaurant and
sees other patrons mocking a mentally disabled busboy who breaks some dishes:

They were laughing at him because he was retarded.

And at first I had been amused along with the rest.

Suddenly I was furious at myself and all those who were smirking at him. I wanted to pick up the dishes and throw them. I wanted to smash their laughing faces. I jumped up and shouted: “Shut up! Leave him alone! He can’t understand. He can’t help what he is...but for God’s sake, have some respect! He’s a human being!” (198-9)

Even if Charlie is accused of melodramatic over-reaction, it is still rooted in sympathy for another person, one he recognizes as powerless and abused in the situation. At the same time, it also reveals a self-awareness others in the novel are not capable of: “Now I can see that unknowingly I joined them in laughing at myself. That hurts most of all” (123). Again, rather than selfish and arrogant, the hyper-intelligent Charlie stands out as the most sympathetic and self-aware character in the novel.
Rather than Charlie being selfish with his increased intelligence, he seems to be no more selfish than the others, and arguably more sympathetic and aware of others’ pain than they are of his. For instance, after Charlie is well aware of his descent back to mental disability, Alice is willing to take care of him. Much like when Algernon became erratic and violent in his deterioration, Charlie becomes self-pitying and suffers from feelings of loss. Alice tells him, “You’re right. I never said I could understand the things that were happening to you...But I’ll tell you one thing. Before you had the operation, you weren’t like this. You didn’t wallow in your own filth and self-pity, you didn’t pollute your own mind by sitting in front of the TV set all day and night, you didn’t snarl and snap at people” (299). Although Alice has been kind to Charlie by looking after him during his deterioration, she simplifies the situation here. It is not involuntary effects of the operation, or really even about Charlie’s intelligence. Charlie knows that he is dying, and like a person might with a terminal illness, he is simply giving up. Alice echoes her earlier argument that Charlie’s pre-operation life was a panacea, stating that even when
people laughed at him, “you wanted them to like you. You acted like a child and you even laughed at yourself along with them.” Alice here praises any infantilizing behavior by Charlie, and states he was kinder when he would endure others mocking him so that he would be liked. Charlie, unable to comprehend this reasoning, throws her out. Whether his throwing her out or not is justified is not the issue at hand. Instead, it is that only Charlie has any accuracy about his previous self. Despite others’ claims, Charlie is not “an arrogant, self-centered, antisocial bastard.”

This establishment of Charlie’s voice as the most ethical and aware among the characters is crucial in determining how mental disability is used in the novel. Charlie questions others’ understanding of him when he was mentally disabled, and because his voice can be trusted when he is intelligent, his own estimation of his mentally disabled self causes the reader to believe his perception; as Charlie understands his pre-op self, so too does the reader. Ironically, however, Charlie’s perception of the humanity of his pre-op self is really no different than others’ versions. Just as Nemur believes that the new, post-op Charlie is a new person,
so does Charlie himself. There is no integration of the mentally disabled Charlie and the hyper-intelligent Charlie. The former haunts the latter, existing as a nightmare or Freudian hallucination; to put it in the context of a text like *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the disabled Charlie is the inescapable destiny, the inevitable damnation awaiting the post-op Charlie Gordon. If we read Charlie as near-superhuman, we must say there is no caveat to the Faustian bargain that provides some kind of hope. If we read him as a victim like Monçada or Stanton, we must say there is no one to save us from the horror, no escape from the conditions that will destroy us by disabling us.

The Other Charlie Gordon

Just before Charlie and Professor Nemur’s relationship finally erupts at the science conference, Charlie writes, “It may sound like ingratitude, but that is one of the things that I resent here—the attitude that I am a guinea pig. Nemur’s constant references to having made me what I am, or that someday there will be others like me who will become real human beings...He doesn’t
realize that I was a person before I came here” (145). When Nemur uses this rhetoric at the conference, Charlie expresses his animosity: “I wanted to get up and show everyone what a fool [Nemur] was, to shout at him: I’m a human being, a person—with parents and memories and a history—and I was before you ever wheeled me into that operating room” (161). Presumably it is moments like these that cause Flowers for Algernon to be read in schools; it is, after all, the statement that contradicts the character that causes Charlie to say, “He makes me feel that before the experiment I was not really a human being” (113). Yet, though Charlie obviously is uncomfortable with the idea that he has been made by Nemur and Strauss, he nevertheless performs this idea in how he relates to his own past.

When Charlie first becomes more intelligent, he experiences intense memories. In one of his first moments of memory, he states, “I think its far back...a long time ago when I first started working at Donner’s bakery. I see the street where the bakery is” (43). As this memory progresses, however, the first person gives way to the third. Whenever he sees himself in the past, Charlie calls himself Charlie rather than I: “Coming back
to the bakery he sees some boys advancing...Charlie backs away from the boys laughing...Charlie pushes through the swinging doors” (45). This third person reference to his own past continues throughout the book, and it’s a division that Charlie himself is well aware of: “It’s me, and yet it’s like someone else lying there—another Charlie” (60). When Charlie narrates the memories, it is as though he were never a participant, and is only now an external audience for the first time. In remembering a moment with his family, he states, “I can almost feel it now, the stretching and knotting in his intestines as the two of them stand over him waiting to see what he will do” (75). Charlie is distanced from his own memory as we are from his telling of the memory. The division that Nemur assumes in the post-op Charlie is therefore performed, as he is unable to connect his own being with that mentally disabled man and boy in his memories.

The ghost-like, haunting qualities of the mentally disabled Charlie occur in the book’s most Freudian settings. When Charlie has a sexual thought or attempts a sexual act with Alice or later toward his neighbor Faye, a hallucination occurs of a young disabled Charlie who at times begins to masturbate: “A sharp change in
perception. I saw, from some point in the darkness behind a tree, the two of us lying in each other’s arms. I looked up to see a boy of fifteen or sixteen...As he stood up, I saw his trousers were open and he was exposed” (100). The presence of this teenage Charlie prevents him from being intimate with Alice. The alter ego will permit him to have sex with Faye, though he watches anyway; Charlie simply doesn’t care: “I thought to myself, go ahead you poor bastard—watch. I don’t give a damn any more. And his eyes went wide as he watched” (210).

While the Freudian readings of the pre-op, teenage Charlie’s gaze upon sexual thoughts and acts may have other interpretations, what is important for present purposes is that there is no integration between who Charlie was and who Charlie currently is while intelligent. The pre-op Charlie is a specter interfering in the life of the intelligent Charlie, suggesting that the intelligent Charlie himself recognizes, much like Nemur, that he is born again due to the experiment. Even in non-sexual situations Charlie looks at himself and sees a splintered identity. While thinking about his past Charlie says, “I see little Charlie Gordon—fourteen
or fifteen—looking out at me through the window of his house, and it’s doubly strange to realize how different he was” (115). It is this inability to see himself as the pre-op Charlie that explains why he seeks out his parents. To find them, to speak with them as an intelligent man, is an attempt to reconcile the past Charlie who they knew and the present Charlie who he himself knows. When going to his father Charlie states, “That would make it all real. If he knew I was his son, then I would be a person” (186). Charlie needs this connection to Max Gordon; without it, he is born again as an adult from under the lights of an experimental laboratory.

It is precisely this inability for the post-op Charlie to create harmony with the pre-op Charlie that makes the previous establishment of his sympathy and awareness of himself and others so important. Charlie is not blinded by rage, jealousy, or self-absorption. Instead, he proves to be one of the most sympathetic and selfless characters in the novel. This creates the impression that even the laudable, intelligent Charlie cannot accept the full humanity of the pre-op Charlie. He states fairly early in his cognitive improvement, “I’m
a person. I was somebody before I went under the surgeon’s knife” (85). Yet Charlie never believes this, as he cannot even grammatically make the assumption that the memories he experiences are truly his. They belong to another, to the ghostly spectacle of a teenage boy who watches shamefully yet excitedly at possible sexual endeavors. Late in the novel Charlie states to Alice, “I can’t help feeling that I’m not me. I’ve usurped his place and locked him out…What I mean to say is that Charlie Gordon exists in the past, and the past is real…the old Charlie can’t be destroyed. He exists….All I wanted to do was prove that Charlie existed as a person in the past, so that I could justify my own existence…I’ve discovered not only did Charlie exist in the past, he exists now” (201). Charlie may be admitting to the existence of the pre-op Charlie, but only as an other, and in this case a ghost. He is from the past, still lingering in the periphery. Yet there is still no acceptance that this pitiful Charlie we met at the beginning of the novel is the same as the more intelligent, and as-proven humane Charlie who utters these words.
This returns us to the initial pitiful Charlie who was mentally disabled. The overwhelming pity we feel for him as readers can be understood as the obstacle to the cognitively improved and ethically sound Charlie Gordon after the experiment. Because this new Charlie, however, cannot see (much like the other characters) himself as the same person as the initial Charlie, that initial Charlie becomes more than just his original pitiful figure; now he is an outsider even to the hero(es) of the novel. In his study of narratology in science fiction, Carl Malmgren states, “The alien actant and its human counterpart occupy the center stage of the fictional universe, and an exploration of their respective unique qualities is the sine qua non of the fiction.”\(^5\) Such is the case in *Flowers for Algernon*, but just as the created cyborg is determined to be more human than the original disabled human, here the alien actant is Charlie Gordon as a disabled boy. The hyper-intelligent version shares the stage with him, but here the outsider is the original, and this outsider is an impediment. He haunts the improved Charlie as a reminder of an inevitable

destiny, performing a role in the text just as the mouse Algernon does. Algernon deteriorates first, and we know Charlie soon will as well. The specter of the pre-op Charlie does the same, so that when his deterioration begins, the pre-op Charlie works not only as a reminder of our initial pity, but of death. Our pity is no longer for the mentally disabled Charlie, but for the intelligent Charlie. The mentally disabled version of Charlie now operates in the text as a kind of agent of loss and suffering who will take away what we as readers want Charlie to have: purpose, reconciliation with his sister, and love with Alice. The return of the mentally disabled Charlie Gordon therefore works as the horror that mental disability is in Melmoth the Wanderer: damnation. In Melmoth this damnation carries an eternal significance to it, as Melmoth himself suggests, an action perhaps made plausible as it coincides with the heresies of the Catholic tyrants. In Flowers for Algernon there is no mention of the soul, no existence hinted at beyond the material. Therefore the loss of consciousness is a permanent erasing just as damnation would be in a text that suggests an eternal life.
Rhetorically, the return of Charlie’s disability essentially operates like death. It promises to demolish everything the cognitively-abled Charlie has built, as well as hopes to build. He states in his letter to the foundation that funded his operation, “As long as I am able to write, I will continue to put down my thoughts and ideas in these progress reports. It is one of my few solitary pleasures...However, by all indications, my own mental deterioration will be quite rapid” (255). This type of rhetoric about what will become of Charlie is consistent throughout his final days as an intelligent man. He is not simply in a race against time; it is that time brings complete oblivion. Because Charlie could not imagine himself as the Charlie who was mentally disabled, it is only natural that he can only conceive of his future as non-existence.

Charlie’s final days as intelligent are marked with a voracious need to do something of lasting import for humanity, like a rich man who knows he is dying and wildly attempts to give his money away in fits. Charlie states, with the tone of a martyr dying for the good of the banner,
What eludes me is the reason for [Algernon’s] regression...If I can find that out, and if it adds even one jot of information to whatever else has been discovered about mental retardation and the possibility of helping others like myself, I will be satisfied. Whatever happens to me, I will have lived a thousand normal lives by what I might add to others not yet born. That’s enough.

Of course, if Charlie is a martyr here, the question is what he is martyred by. The only possible answer is mental disability itself, now far removed from the earlier pity it produced on the reader, acting as a synonym for death and eradication. Writing about the archetype of the transformed person in science fiction, Gary Wolfe states,

The anthropological and psychological literature on such tales of transformation is immense, and the common factor in interpretations of such tales is that they are

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6 This is even more the case as Charlie seems to come to a peace about Nemur and Strauss, as well as the operation. Rather than shaking his fists at the heaven for the experiment, the lingering villain in the corner is not the initial cause of death (the operation), but death itself (disability).
somehow involved with the passage from one state of being to another, from ignorance to knowledge. Transformation is almost universally a passage into the unknown, the crossing of a barrier that broadens and deepens the scope of experience.

In this novel Charlie’s great transformation has been from the unknown to the known, and because the unknown is registered as a lack due to disability this position of the known is positive. Much like he is the inversion of the cyborg and the alien, here he is the inversion of the transformed human. He travels toward knowability from a place of unknowability. Because he must return to that unknowability, however, mental disability becomes like a death. Even though it is his original state, it is the undoing of his great transformation.

This rhetoric of death is pervasive throughout the final days of the intelligent Charlie Gordon. Already deteriorating, Charlie sees himself in the mirror and instead only sees the Charlie he will become. Even in identical reflection (as there is no reason to suppose a physical change) Charlie can no longer see himself as a single identity, and offers his body back to the mentally
disabled version of himself: “It’s your body and your brain—and your life, even though you weren’t able to make much use of it. I don’t have the right to take it away from you. Nobody does. Who’s to say that my light is better than your darkness? Who’s to say death is better than your darkness? Who am I to say?” (252).

Intelligence is obviously connected with light here and disability with darkness, but Charlie goes on to connect death with mental disability. He seems to suggest that the conventional wisdom is that death is better than mental disability, and is only toying with the idea that it may not be as bad. In the end, however, he can make no real judgment between the advantages of death and mental disability. This moment is echoed in the final moments Charlie has with those he must say goodbye to. He tells his mother he’s “going away,” using a euphemism for death to apparently protect the senile woman’s feeble brain. In his last moments with Alice, lying next to her while she sleeps, Charlie meditates on how each person must travel “toward the goal-box of solitary death” (294). Considering how humans need other humans, something he apparently learned while intelligent, Charlie states, “our bodies fused a link in the human
chain that kept us from being swept into nothing” (294). The approach of mental disability then is consistently appropriated by death language, and the communal values he learns while intelligent are in danger of “being swept into nothing,” or in other words, being lost within the mind of a mentally disabled man. During his final therapy session with Dr. Strauss, Charlie seems to understand this unity of life as he fades into a psychedelic moment where borders become fuzzy: “as I start through the opening, I feel the pressure around me, propelling me in violent wavelike motions toward the mouth of the cave...and suddenly I am hurled against the walls...Again, I know I will pierce the crust into that holy light” (284). To be sure, there is no evidence that bursting into “holy light” is mental disability itself. The rhetoric speaks otherwise. Instead, the holy light comes at the moment of death, and this final therapy session for Charlie operates like the transplantation from life to death. Charlie, deteriorating and therefore part-intelligent and part-disabled, experiences a unity between existence and whatever seems to be beyond. Writing that Charlie Gordon’s experience mirrors Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, Donald Palumbo explains this final
therapy session not as death but as echo of the apotheosis that all heroes must undergo: “Charlie’s entire post-operative experience is a sphere of re-birth is indicated by the extended rebirth metaphor he imbeds in his description of his last therapy session with Dr. Strauss, during which he jokes about wanting to be ‘reborn’ immediately prior to having his out-of-body experience.”7 While Keyes may be invoking birth imagery here, as well as the novel’s epigraph of the metaphor of the cave from Plato’s Republic, it is inconsistent to find a new, better life or understanding from this experience. If Charlie is experiencing apotheosis in this moment, then it must be a painful image of what can never be rather than what is soon to come. Mental disability is blankness, and the only positive rhetoric can be through reading “the holy light” as a non-existence that is painless. A newer, mystical understanding is not possible with the consistent language that Charlie is a doomed man quickly running out of time.

All of the rhetoric of mental disability-as-death, however, is perhaps most clearly expressed through the image of Warren, the state asylum. It is first mentioned early in the novel when a pre-op Charlie establishes it as a place of fear: “Mabye the experimint dint werk. Maby I wont get smart and Ill have to go live at the Warren home” (20). The most compassionate man in the novel (though we know very little of him) is Mr. Donner, and his reaction to Warren is the same as the pre-op Charlie: he does not allow his nephew to spend even a night there, promising the state officials that he will give employment to Charlie and help him live on his own. When Charlie speaks with Nemur about what the contingency plans are if he should deteriorate, he tells him Warren. Charlie then connects Warren with the laboratory animals whose destiny is the incinerator: “They had thought of everything. Warren was the logical place—the deep freeze where I could be put away for the rest of my days. ‘At least it’s not the incinerator,’ I said” (220). Only paragraphs later Charlie connects Warren with death, saying, “I could see he was upset about the idea of my visiting Warren. As if I were ordering my coffin, to sit in before I died.”
Ironically, when Charlie does visit his future home, he completely misinterprets what he sees. Although the idea of Warren may be Dickensian, the head psychologist informs him that patients are not there by force, there are no gates or fences, and those who leave by their own will soon come back because “The world doesn’t want them and they soon know it” (223). Pitiful or not, Warren is more of a welcoming place than New York at large. When he visits the different parts of Warren, Charlie witnesses care not only from the employees, but between patients themselves. Winslow, the head psychologist, states, “sometimes they know enough to seek human contact and affection from each other” (226). A nurse describes the patients as children, and the woodworking class is attended by a kindhearted overseer.\footnote{This is a moment where cultural representations of mental disability can be a difficult enterprise. Clearly the current political climate is against these types of asylums like Warren. Yet in \textit{Flowers for Algernon}, Warren is nevertheless a more welcome place than the city. Though some may balk at the patronizing language of a nurse calling the disabled her children, this is nevertheless the most consistent, positive interaction we see with the mentally disabled.} When Charlie questions Winslow about how one patient cares for another, Winslow states, “Well, how many people do you know who are prepared to take a grown man into his arms and let him nurse with the bottle? And take the chance
of having the patient urinate or defecate all over him?” (230). Charlie nevertheless looks past this benevolence and sees Warren as the coffin for his body, his soul and mind long since departed: “No one had spoken of hope. The feeling was of living death—or worse, of never having been fully alive and knowing. Souls withered from the beginning, and doomed to stare into the time and space of every day” (231). Charlie’s comment here echoes how Alice and Nemur naively viewed him as arrogant and self-centered; Charlie has ignored what we as readers have seen, and suggested something that for the reader to believe must be taken only on his word. Clearly distraught at his deterioration, Charlie connects mental disability with sub-human souls and death. When in his last moments as an intelligent man, Charlie admonishes himself to remember the specter of Warren: “the empty smiles, the blank expressions, everyone laughing at them. Little Charlie Gordon staring at me through the window—waiting. Please, not that again” (296). The idea of

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9 Charlie does bristle at the idea of being patronized as a mentally disabled man when he watches a man who has made a crude item with wood be congratulated. Charlie’s rhetoric, however, is less about the mentally disabled being infantilized as it is his concern with one day being so insensible to his own inadequacies. It is less a worry about the treatment of the mentally disabled than it is that he will be treated the same way.
being mocked and isolated as he (or in his eyes, as the other Charlie) once was is certainly understandable, but Charlie is clearly wrong about what happened at Warren. No one laughed at the others; instead, there was the site of paternal and sibling care for the mentally disabled. To Charlie and the others, however, such care is not strong enough to overcome the “living death” that mental disability assumes.

Because *Flowers for Algernon* are the journals of Charlie, there is no reason to assume that his journals will stop because he returns to mental disability. After all, he opened the novel from his original state. Yet the last page reads like the last scribbled words of a dying man. The spelling is again incorrect, and Charlie’s mind is once more overly-literal and simplistic. He writes, “If you ever reed this Miss [Alice] Kinnian dont be sorry for me. Im glad I got a second chance in life like you said...Goodby Miss Kinnian and dr Strauss and evrybody…” (310, 11). The novel then

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10 There is a suggestion in one part of the novel that Charlie could deteriorate to an even lower I.Q. than he began. Yet, this is given no more attention than the prospect that Charlie could die. There is no reason, however, to think anyone in his life thinks Charlie will die. The only death is a metaphorical one in the form of disability.
concludes with two postscripts. The first a pathetic promise that Charlie will have friends again because he will let people mock him. The second a request to “put some flowers on Algernons grave in the back yard.” Although both of these invoke the pity seen at the beginning of the book, it is a pity mixed with the horror of the death of the heroic Charlie who struggled against his descent into disability. We witness Charlie break Alice’s heart by returning to her classroom as a mentally disabled man; Alice’s last moment is to run out of the room crying. Mental disability then acts as the great terminal disease that causes horror. The pity we have is for the intelligent Charlie who has descended into oblivion, not for the Charlie who, if we are to truly believe Alice, Nemur, and others, had a great life before, and could therefore return to that life.

The metaphorical horror of non-existence and oblivion that mental disability creates in *Flowers for Algernon* is undoubtedly more subtle than what occurs in Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*. In the latter we are always horrified by the prospect of a person permanently losing their reason. In Keyes’ novel, however, mental disability undergoes a metamorphosis in order to create
the right emotions from the reader. We must initially pity Charlie Gordon in order to want him to overcome his mental disability; when he does, we celebrate his new intelligence by being rewarded with a man who is not the arrogant, self-centered others claim him to be, but a sympathetic, moral man who is frightfully existing on a precipice. As a tragedy then, mental disability shifts to a horrifying inevitability. Never having had to see the pre-op Charlie as the same Charlie who becomes hyper-intelligent, we as readers are able to convert the man we initially pitied into the man we ultimately fear; like death, he erases what good has been created in the novel. There are no epilogues for Charlie’s “new” existence. His postscripts are letters from a buried man. As readers we are left with the memory of the Charlie who loved Alice and longed to create something lasting and good for humanity. Mental disability, like death, has eliminated the possibility for any new experiences to occur.
CHAPTER IV

“RIVET THESE HANDS TOGETHER”: PIP AND THE NEED FOR THE OTHER IN MOBY-DICK

If disability is discussed in regards to Melville’s writing, it is most often seen in the missing leg of Ahab or, as seen in the Introduction, the (perhaps supposed) sensorial lack of the Deaf-Mute in The Confidence-Man. There is another disabled character from Melville’s catalogue, however, and that is the black cabin-boy of the Pequod, Ahab’s eventual sidekick, Pip. Discussions of Pip generally center around Melville’s construction of his blackness, or his “madness” and its relationship to Ahab. Pip is a minor character, seemingly little more than the Pequod’s black cook: a racial stereotype that provides backdrop for scenes, especially ones of buffoonery. When we first meet Pip he is a tambourine-playing cabin boy, called by the other sailors to entertain them in a makeshift minstrel show at midnight on the main deck. By the end of the novel, however, Pip is Ahab’s closest confidant, in some ways an entirely new character born out of his disabling event. If Ahab sees himself as wounded by God through his physical disabling
by Moby Dick, then he views his cabin-boy Pip as a more radical victim of the heavens, wounded by the divine through his mental disabling. Pip then serves as a more radical version of Ahab, and therefore is also a warning shot across Ahab’s bow; rather than losing “only” his leg, Pip encounters the divine while lost at sea and loses his entire identity. To Ahab then, he is his enemy’s victim, and therefore a friend. To Ahab’s God, a warning of what comes when mortals attempt to approach the infinite. In this manner Pip’s role is reminiscent of the Gothic horror seen in Melmoth and Flowers for Algernon. No longer able to communicate as before, Pip’s language and demeanor reflect a crippled mind unable to withstand the vastness of the infinite; to those around him, he is a pithed soul. At the same time, however, Pip’s mental disability creates as much as it destroys and frees as much as it horrifies. If his encounter with the divine dismantles his intellect, it also creates the possibility of resisting that insidious version of the divine that Ahab seeks to rebel against. Rather than being the consequence of horror as well as the cause of it, mental disability in Moby-Dick is the consequence of the horror of the infinite, yet at the same time the
potential cause for transcending the madness and individualism that such a divine presence seemingly causes.

Excesses and Deficits

Like John Sandal from *Melmoth*, Charlie Gordon from *Flowers for Algernon* (and in the next chapter Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot*), Pip becomes disabled, and therefore is readily understood in two forms: pre- and post-disabling. Even in his pre-disabled form, however, Pip is other-ed through his blackness, which to Ishmael represents a definitive character type, at least while he is intellectually sound. Andrew Delbanco states, “More than Atlas-like Daggoo, it was the diminutive black cabin boy Pip (short for Pippin) whom Melville chose to bear the weight of the racial theme...At first, Pip is little more than the stock figure of the dancing darky, amusing the crew by high-stepping to the sound of his tambourine.”¹ At the beginning of the chapter “The Castaway,” Ishmael compares him to the white cabin boy Dough-Boy, and states “[they] made a match, like a black

pony and a white one, of equal developments, though of dissimilar color" (450). Even Pip’s intelligence, which distinguishes him from his white counterpart, is understood through Pip’s blackness: “Pip, though over tender-hearted, was at bottom very bright, with that pleasant, genial, jolly brightness peculiar to his tribe...I write that this little black was brilliant, for even blackness has its brilliancy” (450-1). While Ishmael does not clamor to see Pip as a simple black cabin-boy waiting in the wings to entertain the whites like the other sailors, he nevertheless understands him through the idea of blackness: he is considered the same as Dough-boy but through his blackness, his entertainment style is through his blackness, and his intelligence is through his blackness. Even the way he relates to the hunt for Moby Dick is understood through Pip’s blackness. Just after Pip’s introduction by the other sailors who goad him on to entertain them, he states, “Hold on hard! Jimmini, what a squall! But those chaps there are worst yet—they are your white squalls...that anaconda of an old man swore ‘em in to hunt him! Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that
have no bowels to feel fear” (193). Pip’s words that position the men as specifically white become more important once Ishmael discusses the whiteness of the whale, but even at this point it is clear that Pip sees the hunt, the fearlessness, and the madness as a white enterprise, and as a black boy with no power he can only hope to find recourse from these “white squalls” in their white God.

Once Pip becomes mentally disabled, however, the definition of Pip alters from a black boy aware of his separation from both his fellow mates and their God to a black boy who has encountered an excess of companionship that no one, not black boy nor “anaconda of an old man” can endure. Taking the place of an injured oarsman, Pip is assigned to Stubb’s whaleboat. During his first lowering, he leaps from the boat in fear and becomes tangled in the harpoon line; only begrudgingly does Stubb command Tashtego to cut the line. Stubb gives him the order to “never leave the boat,” though at the next lowering Pip does just that. Through circumstance, Pip is left alone to bob on the ocean’s surface while the other whaling boats continue the chase. Only incidentally is he rescued by the Pequod, and too late to
avoid a mentally disfiguring experience of being alone in the ocean, orphaned and adrift. While Pip obviously retains his blackness to Ishmael and the others, he is nevertheless defined hereafter not through racial identity, but by the disabling caused by being left alone in the ocean. Ishmael states, “By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was” (453). It is by this “idiocy” that Pip thereafter is defined; he may be described as the “little negro” still, but his idiocy caused by his loneliness while bobbing in the water is not idiocy through blackness. If Ishmael earlier defined Pip as intelligent through standards and expectations of blackness, he defines him post-disabling as an idiot no matter his race. It is not a black man’s experience of idiocy, but a universally human one.² Ishmael states of

² This is not a statement that mental disability is somehow always read through the normative body of whiteness. Instead, it is that Pip’s blackness shifts from a function of character in his pre-disabled self to a dimension of character in his post-disabled self. It is not that his blackness is erased from the text or he becomes white, but that rhetorically he is wholly defined through the function of his mental disability after his experience in the sea. Whether a black cabin boy in the 19th century would experience mental disability differently than a white cabin boy is a question for cultural critics. In terms of the rhetoric of Melville’s work, Pip’s primary dimension after his disabling is his incapacity of intellect.
Pip’s experience with the infinite through abject loneliness, “So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought [italics added]” (454). Pip’s experience of disabling is not because he’s black, but because he’s human, emphasized in the fact that Ishmael states “it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself.”

The racial categories that earlier classified Pip have been minimized (though certainly not erased). Readers should be aware that this minimizing of race does not assume that Pip somehow becomes white in the narrative. Instead, as a largely metaphorical character, the vehicle of that metaphor has moved from blackness to mental disability.

If the vehicle of Pip as metaphor shifts because of his disabling, to understand that vehicle it is vital to understand the nature of the disabling itself. As

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3 In “The Question of Race in Moby-Dick” Fred Bernard puts forward that both Ishmael and Ahab are at the very least half black: “Although we will never prove that Ishmael and Ahab are either black or white, the evidence suggests they are mulattos” (387). Even if this were to be the case, however, Ishmael’s association with Pip at this moment is clearly due to event rather than racial identity.

4 Such a statement should not be seen in direct contradiction with Matthew Cordova Frankel’s statement that race is part of the “planned poetic embodiment” of the novel’s aesthetic. At issue here is Pip’s primary “function,” to use Phelan’s term. Here “function” is understood as a characteristic that creates meaning in the novel; in this case, Pip’s idiocy.
discussed earlier, Pip’s disabling comes from being abandoned at sea when he leaps from his whaling boat during a lowering. Before discussing this specific moment of disabling, however, an earlier abandonment and rescue needs to be addressed, as this original experience establishes motifs that will continue through Pip’s experience in the water. At Ishmael’s first lowering a storm abounds, and not only does his whaling boat become swamped from an encounter with a whale, it also becomes lost. Unable to make contact with the Pequod in the storm, the whaling boat attempts to create a distress signal: “Starbuck contrived to ignite the lamp in the lantern; then stretching it on a waif pole, handed it to Queequeg as the standard-bearer of this forlorn hope. There, then, he sat, holding up that imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair” (245). Melville’s language here is complex. Twice he expresses the hope of the whaling boat crew, but both times that hope is qualified with modifiers that render hope meaningless (“forlorn hope” and “hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair.”). “Almighty
forlornness” ironically ascribes religious language not to God but to the absence of God. The very light that Queequeg holds up is an “imbecile candle.” Much like today the word imbecile carries connotations of mental disability and perhaps the coming disabling of Pip, but more importantly it makes the very rescue a symbol of uselessness and ill-communication. The scene is completed when the crew is saved by the Pequod, but only because the Pequod runs them over. By leaping from their whaling boat at the last moment are Ishmael, Queequeg, and Starbuck saved from being devoured by their savior. All of these characteristics prefigure Pip’s abandonment at sea. Pip, of course, is disabled by the experience. He is also rescued just as he is abandoned: accidentally. Ishmael states that Stubb had no intention of abandoning the boy, instead thinking that another whaling boat would pick him up, and the Pequod “by the merest chance” (453) rescues Pip. Most important, however, is the religious language that surrounds both rescues. Devastating irony pervades the language of the first rescue; in Pip’s rescue, the irony too is present, not so much in the description, but in the effects of the episode. Pip encounters the machinations of the divine during his
abandonment, and the effect echoes the "almighty forlornness" of the first rescue: rather than encountering peace the cabin boy is crippled by horror, awarded not salvation but the destruction of his identity.

Because Pip’s experience at sea is both Melville at his feverish best and succinct, I quote it here in full:

...from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at last, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s
sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (454)

The language here is poetic and clear: Pip has seen the inner-workings of the world, described simultaneously as the infinite, Wisdom, and God working at his fate-making machine. Pip has experienced death not as the end of his life, but as the encounter with the greater-than-life, and the encounter is too much for him. Christopher Sten states at this moment of Pip’s disabling he “is overwhelmed. His earthly personality is destroyed.” At the same time, Pip is described as having “opened his soul beyond the initial terror of meeting the Father and, in doing so, come to understand the beginning and the end of all creation. He and the great Father are thus reconciled.”5 This language of reconciliation may overstate a positive effect of Pip’s experience in the sea. Pip is indeed overwhelmed, but rather than be

reconciled he is consumed, consumed by the very thing he consumes by witnessing the depths below him.

As is the case in *Melmoth* and *Flowers for Algernon*, the rhetoric surrounding his disabling is one of incidental contact with excess leading to an unalterable mutation. Ishmael writes the experience of being abandoned overboard “drowned the infinite of his soul.” But this is not a death, so that Pip somehow has lost his soul. Instead, Ishmael states, “Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps.” Just as Monçada is threatened with mental disability when he sees and hears too much that is awful, here Pip’s soul is forced to witness an excess, and from this witnessing he can never recover. From this point on, Pip acts just as God acts within the text: indifferent. If Pip is to be described through a language of deficit, it is a deficit due to excess. If he has lost his perspective, it is because he was overwhelmed with too much perspective.

This rhetoric of both experience with the infinite, as well as the rhetoric of excess, connects this new Pip
with Ahab. While Ahab’s desire to hunt for the whale has obviously had a long history of multiple interpretations, it’s clear that Ahab sees the infinite/God/the divine at work in/through Moby Dick. In his first speech to the crew, the speech that wins him their promise of assimilation, Ahab states, “But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask” (178). Here Ahab is not completely clear in what it is he believes is beyond the “pasteboard mask,” but he does define his true search: the “unknown but still reasoning thing.” Ahab presents himself as able to create new prophecies that battle any of God’s, so that he becomes not the victim of powers above him, but the powers himself: “I’m demoniac...the prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That’s more than ye, ye great gods, ever were” (183). As the novel progresses, his own words and actions make it clear that this thing he hunts is the divine, as he puts more and more emphasis on himself
being the rebel, the Miltonic Satan, who will not endure the whims of a supernatural tyrant. When Ahab reads the doubloon, he sees himself as “Lucifer,” and follows this reading with his own baptism: “Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli” (532). Ahab never maintains a belief, like the surgeon Bunger from the English ship The Samuel Enderby may believe, that Moby Dick is the action of awkward physics and accident. There is the “unknown and still reasoning thing,” and Ahab’s mission is not to disprove it like a galvanized atheist, but rebel against it like Prometheus or Satan.

That we understand Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick to be related to the divine or infinite is what makes Pip so important both to the captain as well as the novel. The target of Ahab’s hate is the source of Pip’s disabling. The reaction of Pip to this encounter with the divine aligns with Ahab’s understanding of how the divine works. Ishmael states that after Pip is rescued he “feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.” Ahab is a man who understands this, as he states during

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6 See Don Geiger’s “Melville’s Black God: Contrary Evidence in ‘The Town-Ho’s Story’” for a discussion of the tyranny of Ahab’s god: he will strike down Ahab just as he will strike down Radney from the Town-Ho: simply because rules are broken, with no regard to justice.
the typhoon that temporarily wrecks the Pequod: “I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt though be kind; and e’en for hate though can’st but kill; and all are killed” (550). What happens to Pip is exactly what Ahab expects would happen from a person who encounters the divine. The ways of the divine to Ahab are impossible to know because they are the ways of a tyrant. Therefore if Ahab’s loss of his leg, that moment when he was in the jaw of the whale, has caused his own monomania, then Pip is the fuller extension of the same experience.

Pip then, as a mentally disabled figure, is the validation of Ahab’s hysteria against an unknown, indifferent, and therefore malicious God. It is the same God who allows the Rachel’s captain’s son to be lost, and Ishmael’s whaling boat to be found by accident. Here it may be beneficial to connect Robert Greenberg’s idea that the inquiry into the whale, despite Ishmael’s many attempts is, a “farcical mass of pseudoerudition and specialization.” So too is knowing the divine, as Pip evidences in what becomes of him. For Ahab then, the

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problem with God is not simply the inability to know his ways. This, like Ishmael’s cetology chapters, can never get at “the living truth.” Only direct experience can find this truth, and direct experience with the divine is crippling. Therefore Ahab holds up Pip as the victim of his enemy, and therefore recipient of sincere compassion. In the beginning of the Pequod’s voyage Ahab is nowhere to be found when the sailors demand that Pip, in the absence of a tambourine, beat his belly to keep time to the dance. Once Pip has become mentally disabled—that is to say, experienced the divine—Ahab is present as the boy’s protector. In the absence of a God-father, Ahab will care for the boy, and thus further rebel: “There can be no hearts above the snow-line. Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines. Here, boy; Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives” (567).

Ahab sees what others do not see because he has experienced a minor version of what Pip has experienced. At the same time, however, Pip is a warning to Ahab: this is what happens should you seek to encounter the infinite any more than you have. After his disabling Pip speaks
of himself in the third person and seemingly has no idea of who he presently is. The idea of Pip is something entirely external to him. Just as Charlie Gordon in *Flowers for Algernon* cannot reconcile with the idea that he was once disabled, Pip cannot recognize that he still has a self. In both characters there exists a fracturing of the subject that excludes the mentally disabled character from being recognized as fully human. Therefore, when Queequeg lies dying on the Pequod, Pip tells him, “Seek out one Pip, who’s now been missing long: I think he’s in those far Antilles. If ye find him, then comfort him; for he must be very sad; for look! he’s left his tambourine behind” (522). Starbuck tries to find some meaning in Pip’s words, but Pip interrupts him to say to Queequeg, “base little Pip, he died a coward; died all a’shiver;--out upon Pip! Hark ye; if ye find Pip, tell all the Antilles he’s a runaway...Let ‘em go drown like Pip, that jumped from a whale-boat” (523). This lack of identity in Pip is repeated in “The Cabin,” when Pip longs not only for Ahab’s companionship, but for his own as well: “Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it, but he’s missing. Pip! Pip!” (581). Ishmael states that Pip has seen too much and cannot forget it,
that he has witnessed in excess what man on earth cannot stand. As quoted earlier, Ahab converts the sailors to his cause of hunting Moby Dick by commanding them to, “strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall.” Pip has done this very thing, though the verb “strike” implies will and force. Neither of these were the case for Pip. His gaze upon the machinations of God was accidental; the excess he endures was without will. The result of this excess, however, is an incompleteness or deficit. Pip is no longer a full person because he was too full with what a person cannot endure. Bryan Short connects this disabling to what first occurs in the opening chapter “Loomings,” when Ishmael states that the sea draws us all in to it, but that its horrible nature is seen in the ending of “The Mast-Head,” when Ishmael states “with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever” (173). Of these two Pip-esque moments, Short writes, “In each case, an unavoidable or unavoidably alluring attempt to look into nature’s sublimest symbol—the sea—proves maddening or deadly.”

Pip’s disability then came from a

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8 Bryan Short, “Multitudinous, God-Omnipresent, Coral Insects:
kind of status as involuntary Narcissus: take in so much in excess only to suffer from lack thereafter. He functions then as a response to Ahab’s call to strike through the pasteboard mask. When Eyal Peretz describes Ahab’s language toward the divine, it is as though he is characterizing Pip’s language since his experience at sea: “Language, before being the vehicle for stated and stable meanings to be communicated between interlocutors who share an understanding, proves to be an enigmatic, incomprehensible, pathos-laden, and surprising wild cry...in short language is a fabulous and monstrous wail.”

Perhaps even more than a reflection or response to Ahab’s language, he is a warning. The finite Pip, whose body is humbled through race, age, and size, endures the infinite, the very thing Ahab wishes to strike forth to confront, and is diminished by it. If Pip’s disability then is a validation of Ahab’s belief in an indifferent but menacing divinity, he is also a warning to Ahab that any attempt to encounter this divinity will result in tragedy.


Pip as the Need for Community

As complex as this makes the minor but metaphorical character of Pip, I believe his mental disability has another complementary metaphorical role in the novel. If Pip stands for the encounter with the divine, and the tragedy that such an encounter entails, he is also representative of the answer to such an encounter. In Lawrance Thompson’s Melville’s Quarrel with God, he states the writer, “Still influenced by the Calvinistic dogma that God did indeed try to exact from mankind a rigid letter-of-the-law obedience, and that Adam’s fall was indeed the first indication of the unjust ruthlessness of God’s punishment, Melville came to view God as the source from whom all evils flow.”¹⁰ One possible solution to this view of God offered in the text is Ahab’s rebellion. Considering himself part of the unelected damned, Ahab therefore believes it is only fitting to his nature that he rebel: “In that worship he can join the hell-fire in himself with the confirming and

answering hell-fire of rage that he finds arrayed against him, and so pursue objectives that are most truly his own and at once harmonious with the ultimate context in which his life is set." Rather than being a rejection of the dogma of the elect, Ahab’s rebellion is a capitulation to the accuracy of such theology. In the same way, Pip offers a different kind of subtle rebellion. If it is a solution to such theology it is only a compromised one, appropriate to someone like Melville who himself was unable to fully reject or adopt the rigidity of Calvinism. After his disabling, Pip’s existence, despite his own breakdown of identity, expresses a repulsion of the individualism inherent in doctrines of the elect and instead embraces the self’s need for the other. After his disabling, those who were previously hostile toward Pip are kind and deferential. Ahab himself toys with the idea of abandoning his quest not because he wants to obey a warning out of self-preservation, but because the very person of Pip is enough to calm his isolating desire for vengeance. Perhaps most revelatory, Pip’s relationship with Ishmael-as-writer grants the latter an accompaniment

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that an orphan wanderer like himself would not otherwise have found.

As stated earlier, before Pip’s encounter with the infinite he is other-ed by his blackness and submissive position on the boat. He is fearful of the whites, and isolated enough to call out to a specifically white god for deliverance. Though we do not see the Pequod’s sailors as a whole embrace Pip after his disabling, we do witness several individual characters become more compassionate to the boy. When Stubb warns the pre-disabled Pip to never leap from the boat, he tells him, “We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (452). We should hesitate in making too much of verbal mockery by Stubb, remembering that he did the same to Ahab at the beginning of the voyage. Yet, this reminder of Pip’s dependency on the whites of the ship for his freedom is nevertheless incongruous with Stubb’s later relationship to Pip after the latter’s encounter in the sea. After Ahab takes his turn at projecting himself onto the doubloon, Stubb does the same, but speaks of the others surrounding him as he stands there. When Stubb sees Pip, he speaks of the boy as an unfortunate product
of a disabling, a disabling that came after Stubb threatened the boy should he ever stand in the way of a whale hunt. Samuel Otter states throughout *Moby-Dick* physical touch has the ability to transform character relations, yet Pip, isolated and watched by Stubb as he attempts to interpret the doubloon, can only repeat the conjugation of the verb to look. Stubb sees the separation between himself and Pip, and feels pity for him: “poor boy! would he had died, or I; he’s half horrible to me. he too has been watching all of these interpreters...Stand away again and hear him. Hark!” (475). Even though Pip is “horrible” to the second-mate, he nevertheless stands aside to be drawn to Pip’s words. Pip is isolated and Stubb cannot understand him, yet the latter is not immediately driven away even in his horror. He pities Pip, a pity that never occurred when the whaling hunt was interrupted by Pip’s fear. Here, Pip’s manic words don’t drive Stubb into anger, but horror. When he leaves Pip muttering at the doubloon, it is because “he’s too crazy-witty for my sanity,” and then, “I could go hang myself,” suggesting that Stubb has felt some guilt toward the boy. Not only is this a reversal of Stubb’s earlier callousness, it is even a marked
separation from Stubb’s last words as he looks Moby Dick in the eye before the impact: “I grin at thee, thou grinning whale” (622). In this moment with Pip, Stubb’s fearlessness and callousness is suspended. He wants to turn away from Pip, yet can’t.

Starbuck has no interaction with Pip before his disabling, but we do know that the first-mate is the most religiously devout man on board. He alone attempts to resist Ahab’s call to hunt Moby Dick, and it is perhaps only Starbuck’s religion that keeps him from murdering Ahab in his sleep. Yet none of this prevents Starbuck from seeing wisdom in Pip where seemingly no wisdom should be. Starbuck’s most intimate interaction with Pip comes while Queequeg is apparently dying. Rather than simply accepting Pip’s nonsensical rants as the product of lunacy, the superstitious Starbuck sees them as the product of lunacy that nevertheless speak heavenly truths. Starbuck not only does not dismiss Pip’s words, he actively desires them. Starbuck states, “Hark! he speaks again: but more wildly now” (521). Pip’s lack of self brings Starbuck closer to him, a closeness that never occurred before the cabin-boy’s disabling, especially when compared to how Pip was first introduced
in the novel. Additionally, Starbuck and Pip are metaphorically united in their desire not just to stop the hunt for Moby Dick, but to save Ahab. Starbuck nearly convinces his captain of aborting the mission by forcing him to see his wife and children in Starbuck’s eyes. When this fails, Starbuck makes a last ditch effort when Ahab lowers on the third and last day of the chase:

“For the third time my soul’s ship starts upon this voyage, Starbuck.”

“Aye, sir, thou wilt have it so.”

“Some ships sail from their ports, and ever afterwards are missing, Starbuck!”

“Truth, sir: saddest truth.”

“Some men die at ebb tide; some at low water; some at the full of the flood;--and I feel now like a billow that’s all one crested comb, Starbuck. I am old;--shake hands with me, man.”

Their hands met; their eyes fastened; Starbuck’s tears the glue.

“Oh my captain, my captain!–noble heart–go not–go not!–see, it’s a brave man that weeps;
how great the agony of the persuasion then!"

Starbuck fails in his attempt to save his captain (and there is little cause to doubt that Starbuck believes that Ahab indeed has a noble heart), but he is coupled with Pip who, immediately after Starbuck’s attempt, follows with his own: “‘The sharks! The sharks,’” cried a voice from the low cabin-window there; ‘O master, my master, come back!’” Ishmael tells us that “Ahab heard nothing; for his own voice was high-lifted then.” Both Starbuck and Pip cannot save their captain, but they are coupled here as the only ones who resist the mission not for their own lives, but for the life of the noble heart and master.

Of course the most obvious and important example of Pip embodying the necessity of humans clinging to one another is through the love the cabin boy has for his master. As earlier noted, Ahab sees Pip as a victim of his enemy, and it is this that at least initially causes Ahab’s attraction to the boy. By the end of both their lives, however, they come to need one another to an extent that it seems as though Melville is reprising Ishmael and Queequeg’s intimate relationship. As Ahab
passes the carpenter who converts Ishmael’s coffin into a life-buoy, Ahab ruminates on the odd conversion of purpose, “Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver! I’ll think of that. But no. So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me” (575). Here Ahab first imagines that the coffin is what creates a human’s immortal self, though such contemplations are, he decides, too little and too late for a man so far gone as Ahab. His response to this need is to “go below” and rid himself of “accursed sounds.” In going below, however, he goes toward Pip: “Now, then, Pip, we’ll talk this over; I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee! Some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee.” Ahab here is vague about what it is Pip is actually offering him—what these “wondrous philosophies” might be—but other passages will more clearly define not just Ahab’s need for Pip, but what Pip so adequately offers him.

Only pages later we see Ahab admonishing Pip for following Ahab. Here the reciprocal nature of the companionship is made clear, as is what Pip offers Ahab.
The captain states, “The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health” (580). Pip is what Ahab needs to be assured that Moby Dick and the divine will behind him is a cruel menace, yet the connection created with Pip makes Ahab no longer desire to confront that cruel menace. If Ahab’s initial attraction to Pip is that he is the victim of his enemy and therefore a flag-bearer for his own righteousness, his continued loyalty to him owes less to retribution and more to the near-salvific presence of Pip. The cabin boy here offers Ahab a path toward transcendence if he is willing to accept the former’s presence. In this we see that Pip does not disprove Ahab’s hysteria about Moby Dick and what lies beyond him; instead, he confirms it, but in so doing offers a hopeful alternative: companionship. T. Walter Herbert addresses the number of Jonahs that exist within the novel, with Ahab being one of them who, unlike Father Mapple’s version, does not head toward Nineveh, but refuses to act in obedience to that which is “a cosmic affront and determined to be
Pip offers a kind of third possible Jonah to Ahab, one that does not find his identity in his relation to the divine will. Instead, the divine is bypassed for another person (in this case, Pip himself). Ahab’s malady is not cured by being shown incorrect, but in offering the only possible transcendence in a universe with such a cruel menace for a divine presence. This recourse is at some level beneficial to Pip as well, as Ahab states, “methinks like-cures-like applies to him too; [Pip] grows so sane again.” Out of obedience to his “master” Pip does go below and leaves Ahab alone, but the loneliness is too much of a reminder to Pip of his encounter with the sea. Just as he serves as Ahab’s cure to his need to hunt Moby Dick, Ahab serves as Pip’s cure to the soul-pithing loneliness that caused him to become disabled: “Here he this instant stood; I stand in his air,—but I’m alone…Oh, master! Master! I am indeed down-hearted when you walk over me” (581). Here Melville puns on Ahab’s domination and the geography of the ship, but for Pip both meanings are the same: they both result in a

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loss of Ahab. \(^{13}\) I have already mentioned Pip’s calling to Ahab to remain on the boat just after Starbuck has his own final attempt to persuade the captain. Pip’s call to his master, however, is best viewed through this filter: that Pip doesn’t seek to end the hunt with Moby Dick because he, in encountering the infinite is made aware of Ahab’s folly, but because Pip doesn’t want to be separated again from his master. That Pip receives the same solace in companionship that Ahab receives is important to Pip’s role in the novel.

This relationship of Pip to Ahab in regards to companionship connects them both to Ishmael and Queequeg, the novel’s most pervasive example of the rejection of the self’s desire for the embrace of the other. One of Queequeg’s narrative roles in the text is to embody the necessity and contentment that comes from companionship. \(^{14}\) It is through Queequeg that Ishmael is cured of his

\(^{13}\) The connection that exists here between and Ahab and Pip and Lear and his Fool is well documented, most completely in Julian Markel’s Melville and the Politics of Identity. Markel sates, “Melville quotes Lear only as much as needed, and in just the right places, to draw the analogy between him and Ahab as far as it may accurately go. In Ahab’s full tragic progression, no less than in the local texture of Melville’s prose, King Lear emerges as the controlling Shakespearean model” (64).

\(^{14}\) It is outside the scope of this chapter to make the word “companionship” more specific; for instance, whether it be sexual companionship. Though the homoerotic side of Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship is present, Pip and Ahab’s relationship is clearly one
prejudice and his reliance on doctrines of Christianity that he knows he does not sincerely believe. Because of this, there is a parallel of Queequeg and Ishmael in Pip and Ahab. Queequeg is, as the cannibal from the South Pacific, the other that Ishmael needs to force him to turn away from the reliance on dogma, and embrace the reliance of others. Pip functions the same way with Ahab; Ahab has his own “dogma” that he obsessively clings to, yet the presence of Pip threatens—to Ahab’s full awareness—the need to continue with the obsession. Both Queequeg and Pip, of course, are racially other-ed as well as philosophically other-ed. Queequeg is the tattooed islander with his idol Yojo, and Pip is the black boy from Alabama with his idiocy caused by the divine encounter. Both Queequeg and Pip also serve as prophets whose message no one will/can hear or understand. After Queequeg’s brush with death, Ishmael states,

of master and servant. This does not diminish any sexual aspect of Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship, but it does explain why the term companionship should be understood as broad as it is.

15 Lawrance Thompson and others have commented on how Ishmael’s philosophy toward fate, and toward the cruelty of fate, is similar to Ahab’s. If this is the case, then the connection between Queequeg and Pip is that much stronger.
he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body. And this tattooing...had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read...and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. (524)

Pip too makes prophecies that no one hears or understands. When Ahab engages in his baptism in the name of the devil, Pip’s voice is heard from beneath: “But ere [Ahab] entered his cabin, a light, unnatural, half-bantering, yet most piteous sound was heard. Oh, Pip! Thy wretched laugh, thy idle but unresting eye; all thy strange mummeries not unmeaningly blended with the black tragedy of the melancholy ship, and mocked it [italics added]” (533). Pip’s nonsensical words and
actions bear witness to the lost cause of the hunt and what is waiting in store. When Ahab forces him to remain below, Pip states, “But here I’ll stay, though this stern strikes rocks; and they bulge through; and oysters come to join me” (581). Though unable to interpret the prophecies they express, both Queequeg and Pip are prophets.

Fedallah, of course, is a third other, and a third prophet as well, though he seems to know what exactly how to interpret the prophecies he makes. But unlike Fedallah, there is no Mephistophelean side to the companionship that Queequeg and Pip offer. Both Queequeg and Pip offer themselves to their companions. Queequeg offers his bed and money to Ishmael without hesitation. Pip takes Ahab’s hand and states, “Ah, now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as this, perhaps he had e’er been lost! This seems to me, sir, as a man-robe; something that weak souls may hold by. Oh, sir, let old Perth no come and rivet these two hands together; the black one with the white, for I will not let this go” (567). There is no diabolism in Pip’s last words here. He is not going to drag Ahab into the depths of the sea. If Ahab is what Paul Brodtkorb suggests, “a strange kind
of emptiness, a lack...a being so tormented, so at war with himself; so often at interior variance with his exterior," then he is seemingly unable to be saved as he is unknowable to all others. Yet Pip demands they “rivet these two hands together.” He subtly invokes the monkey-rope that Ishmael and Queequeg are tied to that so memorably represents the need and dependency of one for another. Just as Queequeg and Ishmael are seemingly tied together with fates intertwined, such is the desire of Pip for Ahab. Although Ahab responds to Pip that he feels the same, he eventually chooses his hunt for Moby Dick over the cabin boy. And just as Pip has used the monkey-rope image to unite them, so it is embodied in both men’s deaths. By choosing the hunt for Moby Dick over Pip, Ahab doesn’t sever the line that connects them; instead, he falls into the water, taking Pip with him. Just as Queequeg does for Ishmael then, Pip serves as the other end of the balance that Melville believes people must have with one another. Pip brings others closer to him, including even the reclusive Ahab who seeks Fedallah only for help in the hunt and Starbuck when Ahab feels

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weak; for true companionship, there is Pip. James Babin states of *Moby-Dick* as a whole, “Melville achieved a sharp break with what [Eric] Voegelin calls ‘modernity,’ the core of which is closure to being and the persistent attempt to escape history and the human condition.”¹⁷ (114). This turning away from closure is clearly seen in Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship, but in Ahab and Pip’s as well. If Pip’s disabling initially creates an ally for Ahab, it eventually also grants the latter a person willing to be the other end of the monkey-rope, not due to manipulation or coercion, but out of the self’s need and desire for the other. In this lies the particular tragedy of Pip’s fate, as the other end of his line willfully chooses to dive into the sea rather than embrace the relationship the monkey-rope necessarily creates.

Pip as the Narrative Need

If Pip post-disabling serves as a metaphor for the need and dependence on others, that metaphor exists at a

meta-textual level as well. From the very moment that Pip’s disabling is introduced, Ishmael sees a connection between himself and the unfortunate. Pip’s loss at sea and Ishmael’s loss at sea are the same, as Ishmael states, “in the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself” (454). Such a statement at the end of “The Castaway,” the chapter when Pip is disabled, reveals an emotional weight to the chapter order, as after this moment Ishmael is reminded (because, of course, he is retelling a memory) of his moment of most intense companionship. Because “The Castaway” immediately precedes the chapter “A Squeeze of the Hand,” the latter therefore exists as an answer to the “abandonment that befell” Ishmael. But because Ishmael has ended “The Castaway” with a warning of his own fate, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” despite its feverish sense of brotherhood, is temporary. As Ishmael works the spermaceti of the whale, he states,

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18 Christopher Durer states that Ishmael “either shuts himself off from outside reality because it is evil and adores himself; or he yearns for the infinite which he assumes to be good and exercises his imagination; or else he allows himself to be absorbed by outside reality, which he sees in turn as glorious” (113). While Ishmael may display all of these psychological characteristics, his relationship with Pip seems to defy that he is always these things.
I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly loving feeling did this avocation beget...Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come, let us squeeze hands all around; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (456)

Because this appears directly one chapter and not even three paragraphs after the disabling of Pip, this description of brotherhood is understood within the light of a coming abandonment. It is as though Ishmael the narrator responds to the fear and anxiety of Pip’s fate with the moment, no matter how temporary, that provided a solution to it.

Of course, that Pip only prefigures Ishmael’s own eventual abandonment at sea doesn’t suggest the metaphor of dependence upon others. Pip dies; Ishmael is the only
survivor of the sinking of the Pequod. He is Pip abandoned without any Ahab to attempt to recover and recover with. In the epilogue he writes of his rescue by the Rachel, and although he is obviously physically saved, there is no reconciliation with loss or the cause of that loss: “On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan” (625). A parent has found a child, and a child a parent, but not the correct ones. The Rachel still mourns, and Ishmael is still “another orphan.” In his writing of his narrative, however, he attempts to understand his own place within a world ordered by the impersonal but cruel divine. From “Loomings” to the epilogue Ishmael cannot understand why things occurred the way they did. From his initial description of his adventure at sea, Ishmael reveals his discomfort with the powers of fate: “I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which

19 Hilda Stubbings reads Captain Gardiner and The Rachel’s rescue of Ishmael as positive: “The refusal of Captain Gardiner to give up the search for his son and his other lost crewmen was the cause of Ishmael’s rescue. The decision of one individual, the captain, saved the life of another” (140). Even with this reading of the ending, Pip’s role in the novel remains the same as Gardiner proves then to be Pip-esque in his uncompromising need to rescue another from isolation.
being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment” (7). He has encountered the infinite by surviving the sea, and his telling of this narrative is his own attempt to make sense of both his survival and the powers that created that survival. It must be remembered, of course, that Ishmael is not even necessarily our narrator’s real name. He demands that we “call” him that, and the Biblical allusion of a wanderer—a wanderer protected by God, which is part of Ishmael’s anxiety—suggests that this orphan has never found his home. Before he is ever called Ishmael, he has already lost Queequeg.

Yet Pip remains as a meta-textual figure who has seen exactly what Ishmael has seen. Certainly abandoned since he is the only survivor, Ishmael nevertheless has a textual companion through his writing of Pip. Pip has seen God’s foot and the treadle, and so too has Ishmael: why should Moby Dick slam himself into the Pequod, and yet while on a life-buoy of a coffin the sharks “unharming…glid[ing] by as if with padlocks on their
mouths; the savage sea-haws sailed with sheathed beaks” (625). *Moby-Dick* as a text becomes Ishmael’s attempt to order exactly what he and Pip have encountered. Ishmael is alone at his writing, but through his writing he has a companion. The retelling of Pip is the telling of Ishmael’s current state. Even more than any similarities with Ahab that Ishmael may have, he is kin to Pip: having seen the infinite through abandonment, having lost a sense of identity, he must seek it out in others; for Pip, this is Ahab, for Ishmael, this is the entire text of *Moby-Dick*.

Pages and pages have been written about Ishmael, Queequeg, and Ahab. This discussion of Pip’s mental disability should only enhance these readings, as Pip, despite his few appearances, has an enormous presence in the novel’s discourse. In only the few chapters he appears in, Pip serves as a validation for Ahab’s hysterical ravings toward the infinite, yet rather than simply being the Gothic figure of horror, he also offers transcendence from the isolation and madness that comes from the infinite; others are drawn to Pip because of the revulsion toward the very power that created him. This includes Ishmael, who sees Pip not only as the bosom
companion of the haunted Ahab who can stand the presence of no others, but Ishmael himself, who encounters the very abandonment that Pip endured. This alternative that Pip points to is of course problematic in the novel, since it is a universe still dictated by a devouring infinite that necessarily negates the possibility of lasting transcendence. What Pip offers is a respite. In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, however, the alternative of isolation and madness is again expressed through the example of the mentally disabled, yet the elusive, lasting transcendence is perhaps more viable
CHAPTER V

THE DISABLED HOLY FOOL AND THE LIMITS OF LOVE IN THE IDIOT

If the representation of the mentally disabled in literature is often interpreted through a reflection of contemporary cultural beliefs, then the representation of Prince Myshkin in The Idiot is often interpreted through Fyodor Dostoevsky’s three notebooks of preparation for the novel. Just as using contemporary cultural beliefs proves problematic as an interpretive model, so too does Dostoevsky’s intent, gleamed through the notebooks. Within their pages Dostoevsky wrote the famous description of Myshkin, the “PRINCE CHRIST,” but at the same time imagined Myshkin “rap[ing]…and set[ting] fire to the house. He takes delight in humiliation.”\(^1\) Perhaps this is why interpretations of Myshkin are so wildly disparate. To some he is a wicked, moral failure that leads to the triumph of nihilism, proof that Dostoevsky himself struggled in his faith. To others

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Myshkin is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Yet for all the attention Dostoevsky’s notebooks for *The Idiot* receives, there is little notice give to the fact that, according to biographer Joseph Frank, only two characteristics of Myshkin remain throughout all three notebooks: he is an epileptic and eventually an idiot. While the relationship to epilepsy and mental disability will be discussed later in the chapter (as I believe them to be different “conditions”), the immediate conclusion is that if Dostoevsky’s intent as rendered through the notebooks is to be valued by critics, it should lead to a long discussion of both Myshkin’s epilepsy and eventual mental disability.

Despite Bakhtin’s work with Dostoevsky, mental disability in *The Idiot* is often seen as a monolithic structural part of the novel that metaphorizes annihilation. George Panichas calls Myshkin’s final idiocy the “solution” to the terror that comes with what he considers the lack of redemption in the novel. Likewise, Michele Frucht Levy believes Myshkin’s final

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2 Even this incarnational aspect leads to contradictory readings. See Murray Kreiger’s “Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*: The Curse of Saintliness” for a reading that connects Myshkin’s Christ-like nature with his deadliness to others.

idiocy is the eradication of his Quixote-like idealism, memorably calling that idealism an ironic “Marriage to the Abyss.”⁴ The abyss, of course, is the nothingness inherent in the vapidness of the idiot’s mind and soul. Even Sarah Young in her work on the narrative structure of the novel states that Myshkin’s idiocy serves as a void only to be filled by pessimism: “Ippolit’s nightmarish visions replace the prince’s religious experience...the end of the novel is exceptionally bleak, pointing to the impossibility of sustaining the ideal of selfless love in human interactions.”⁵ Such descriptions resemble the other Gothic texts where disability is in part horrifying because it is a matter of becoming, and although Myshkin himself becomes mentally disabled, this transformation exists as prologue and epilogue to the novel. Myshkin begins the narrative returning to Petersburg, his train emerging from a fog just as he has emerged from the oblivion of complete mental incapacity. The Idiot then ends with Myshkin returning to that earlier, place-less state of disability: “he no longer

⁵ Sarah J. Young, Dostoevsky’s Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative (London: Anthem, 2004), 121, 134.
understood of what they asked him about, and did not recognize the people who came in and surrounded him."  

Robin Feuer Miller writes of this Gothic quality when she claims “the themes and techniques explored by the Gothic novelists find a direct echo in [The Idiot]. But Dostoevsky raises the themes and techniques of the Gothic novelists to new heights, for he forges a metaphysical system out of a language, which, in the hands of lesser novelists, remains merely a style.”  

Miller does not include in this metaphysical system Dostoevsky’s use of mental disability, but perhaps she should: like in Melmoth, idiocy is seemingly complete and utter oblivion for Myshkin. Born from the fog of idiocy and returning to it when the novel ends, Myshkin is bookended by complete mental and spiritual eradication. Nevertheless, although Dostoevsky’s vision of idiocy may indeed be an echo of Maturin’s, there is, as Miller calls it, a “metaphysical system” born out of that Gothic usage. Myshkin’s final state is certainly an oblivion, yet reading that oblivion within the context of Eastern

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6 Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Idiot, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2003), 611. All further references to this edition are given in the text.

Orthodoxy and the traditions within it create a second “side” of mental disability. Much like Pip is a product and source of horror, yet expresses the potential for transcendence, so Myshkin’s debilitation expresses horror yet points to an alternative to that horror. By examining Myshkin’s similarity to the religious holy fool, the role of mental disability in the novel becomes more than a metaphor for spiritual eradication. Instead, as a crucial part of The Idiot’s polyphony, mental disability becomes an expression of the spiritual desire and need for resurrection.

The Holy Fool and Myshkin

Dostoevsky’s use of his Orthodox faith leads (perhaps naturally) to as much disparity in critical views as larger interpretations of the text as a whole. While no critic states that Dostoevsky disregarded Orthodoxy, views about the role and status of religion in the novel are far from unanimous. Malcolm Jones states that Dostoevsky “banishes many central features of the Orthodox tradition to the very margins of his text...the richness of the Orthodox tradition has to die in order
that the shoots of a new faith be born."\textsuperscript{8} Rowan Williams, though certainly not claiming that Dostoevsky’s use of religion is that of an evangelist, states Dostoevsky locates Orthodoxy not in the exhibition of rituals or ceremonies of the faith, but “within an implied ‘order.’”\textsuperscript{9} If any agreement can be made about his use of Orthodoxy it is its complexity. Relevant to this chapter is the very language of Myshkin’s title: idiot. Dostoevsky uses the Latin word “idiot” for the novel’s title, bringing with it the connotations used in the West of “natural fool,” or in modern parlance the mentally disabled. In the opening chapter, however, Rogozhin smiles at Myshkin and tells him he is a yurodovi. This Russian word yurodovi, however, complicates the matter thoroughly, as it not only has the shared meaning of “natural fool,” but also the religious connotation of “holy fool.”

Within Christianity the figure of the holy fool exists primarily in the East. Although some examples can be found in Catholicism and Protestantism, it is by in

\textsuperscript{8} Malcolm Jones, \textit{Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience} (London: Anthem, 2005), 45.
large an Orthodox tradition. Succinctly, the holy fool “pretends that he is mad in order to save his own soul and the souls of others. He chooses to become homeless, poor, disdained and persecuted as Christ himself was. The holy fool teaches people by means of images of sin and he tells them truth disguised behind a fool’s appearance and behaviour.”  

In the sixth century there is the story of the holy fool Symeon, who drags a dead dog on a leash, eats meat at the door of the church during Holy Week, and throws walnuts inside the church at parishioners. All these activities, under the guise of madness, were meant to repudiate the sins of others in a non-rational, performative way. The holy fool in Russia is a traditionally strong religious symbol; St. Basil’s Cathedral in what used to be Red Square, is named not after the early church theologian, but a 16th century holy fool.  

The holy fool figure is a part of the kenotic tradition of asceticism, defined by the participant’s

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11 The history of the holy fool in Russia is minimized when Peter the Great “outlaws” the practice in order to westernize Russia. This is not to say the practice is eliminated, but implicit state-support of the behavior ended. For further reading, see James Billington’s The Icon and the Axe.
voluntary self-humbling in order to imitate Christ’s humility through the incarnation. In his book-length study on Dostoevsky and religion, Steven Cassedy states critics are trapped begging the question, as the reason we find kenosis in Dostoevsky’s works is that the writer himself helped popularize the spiritual idea: “[kenosis] may well refer to a trend that existed in Russian Christianity for some time without being huts named, but as a term with its own set of emphases it was in Dostoevsky’s day a very recent creation...Earlier I mentioned the Russian kenotic tradition and suggested that Dostoevsky may have had more than a little to do with its creation.”12 This is a baffling claim by Cassedy as the idea is partially rooted in Paul’s admonition in Philippians 2: 6-8: “His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself.” The theological weight of kenosis becomes crucial in the fifth century as well as the Christian church attempts to understand what it means for Christ to have both human and divine natures.13 Both in the fifth century Council

13 From the fifth century, from Leo the Great’s Tome: “He who could not be enclosed in space, willed to be enclosed; continuing to be before times, he began to exist in time; the Lord of the universe
of Chalcedon as well as the 19th century understanding, kenosis necessarily suggests that the person relinquishes claims to authority to a less deserving, perhaps even wicked power. Therefore only the reverence of followers or pilgrims would allow a holy fool to have influence, and many examples through church hagiography show that holy fools, when on the brink of receiving positive attention, either flee or act so socially unacceptable as to prevent such popularity.

The tradition of the holy fool should not be confused with the folkloric fool figure who has some kind of incidental wisdom to impart. In Russia this figure exists as Ivanechka the Fool, and in the West in a text like King Lear he is simply the Fool. The holy fool is distinct from this bumbling, accidental philosopher if for no other reason than his irrationality is voluntary. He does not succumb to idiocy, he puts it on.14 For instance, in the above-mentioned St. Symeon of Emesa hagiography, Leontius of Neopolitus constantly states the allowed his infinite majesty to be overshadowed, and took upon him the form of a servant; the impassible God did not disdain to be passible Man and the immortal One to be subjected to the laws of death. Do I include this not only to argue against Cassedy’s claim but also to quote my son’s namesake in the dissertation? Perhaps. 14 Or she. One of the more famous holy fools of Russia is St. Xenia of Petersburg.
saint “pretended,” “acted,” or “played” the part of the fool or idiot. When Symeon speaks with his friend and deacon John there was no reason to continue to act, and he therefore spoke without a disguise: “For concerning this Deacon John, when the two found themselves alone together, the old man did not act like a fool at all, but he conversed with him so gracefully and with such compunction, that often perfume came from his mouth, as Deacon John maintained, ‘such that I almost doubted that he had been a fool only moments before.’”\(^{15}\) The holy fool is not the idiot who, out of sentimentality and accident, is discovered to be the bastion of great wisdom; the holy fool is the prophet who confronts the culture around him in irrational and disturbing ways in order to perform the sins of others so that they may be seen. To return to Leontius of Neopolitus’ hagiography of St. Symeon, the holy fool’s mission was “first, to save souls, whether through afflictions which he sent them in ludicrous or methodical ways, or through miracles which he performed while seeming not to understand, or through maxims which he said to them while playing the fool; and second, that

his virtue not be known, and he receive neither approval nor honor from men.”

As a Russian and member of the Russian Orthodox Church, Dostoevsky was well aware of holy fools and the larger tradition of asceticism through kenosis. In his two novels that follow *The Idiot*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, there are characters who are seen as holy fools.16 Certainly, it is not accidental then that Rogozhin begins the novel by stating, as he’s about to part from Myshkin for the first time, “you come out as a holy fool, Prince, and God loves your kind” (15).

None of this, however, should lessen Myshkin’s complexity; it is not a matter of simply substituting idiot with holy fool. Tat’iana Kasatkina states that the above example is the only time that Myshkin is called a *yurodivi*. Through puns and double entendres he is also called “strange,” “eccentric,” “monstrous,” and “little freak,” but never again a holy fool. V.V. Ivanov sees this variety of terms to all mean *yurodivi*, but Kasatkina

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16 In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the role of the holy fool is quite complex. There is Stinking Lizaveta, Alyosha’s mother who perhaps (and nothing more can be said than perhaps) bears the “natural fool” connotation. There is also the respected Elder Zosima, as well as his fellow monk Fr. Gregory. The narrator is clear that the latter, rather than putting on the cloak of irrationality and social humility, puts on the cloak of holy foolishness itself as a means of gaining status.
recognizes this as part of Myshkin’s acculturation, or moving away from the status of yurodivi. For Kasatkina, not only does this term never come up again in the narrative, but Myshkin becomes the very opposite of a holy fool:

Works that have studied the prince from the standpoint of the institution of holy folly do not give due attention to the fact that he is actually going, as it were, in the opposite direction, from holy fool to little freak (with the ultimate, unattainable goal of being a normal man), while a true holy fool begins as a normal man and has to pass, as a little freak, through the state of freakishness (a condition that has as yet no connection with the divine and is not yet perceived by observers as a means of separating from the workaday world and achieving rapport with the godhead) before becoming a holy fool...The prince is, therefore, a holy fool in reverse, an inverted holy fool—an entity that in structural terms necessarily
displays significant similarities to its antithesis, the holy fool proper.\textsuperscript{17}

While Kasatkina’s analysis of Dostoevsky’s terms is extremely helpful in regards to Myshkin’s voice as compared to others’ view of his voice, the fact that Myshkin is called a holy fool proper only once (or even, at all) should not lead to the dismissal of the idea.

As Kasatkina states there are clear problems with identifying Myshkin with the holy fool since, if he is one, it is in no way a matter of choice. Although his epilepsy provides him with distinct insight just before a fit, Myshkin nevertheless fears his malady and any sign that an epileptic fit may be reverting back to his language-less, idiotic self that precedes the first chapters of the novel. Key to the holy fool is that his seemingly mad actions are purposeful, always meant to expose the sin that others seek so hard to disguise. That Myshkin is without a plan, without any kind of recourse to a stable identity, and powerless to change when he may be affected by his epilepsy breaks any mold of the traditional religious holy fool. In this way I

\textsuperscript{17} Tat’iana Kasatkina, ”“Idiot and Eccentric: Synonyms or Antonyms?” Russian Studies in Literature 38.4 (2002): 84.
agree with Kasatkina’s refusal to accept him as a traditional holy fool. Myshkin, in the words of Jostein Bortnes, seems to “de-symbolise” the role as much as embody it.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless, I agree with the conclusion that Myshkin upsets the tradition of holy fool, but only if one understands that role as created due to his epilepsy or eventual disabling. Unlike Bortnes and Kasatkina, I believe Myshkin plays the role of holy fool within the text, though not through his mental impairments. The holy fool, as stated above, makes a voluntary act into seeming madness so that the sinner might see the sin; the disruption of the lives of another is not an accident, but an intentional process. We therefore cannot locate holy foolishness in Myshkin’s idiocy itself, or the epilepsy that seemingly brought it about. What does make Myshkin a holy fool therefore is not his idiocy, but his voluntary acceptance of a humbled, socially reduced position in order to save both Nastasya Filippovna and Parfyon Rogozhin.\textsuperscript{19} Myshkin arrives in Petersbourg in

\textsuperscript{19} In A Devil’s Vaudeville W.J. Leatherbarrow also suggests Myshkin’s holy foolishness, but sees the connection through the character’s humility around others, his endurance of ridicule, and asexuality.
order to collect an inheritance. Though his family line is nearly non-existent, he is nevertheless coming into social power as he approaches a life in Russia from Switzerland. Yet his first action, before he even reaches Russia and before he collects his massive inheritance, is to accept the perverted passion of one man in order to re-create it into a passion for resurrection. This act of mirroring Rogozhin’s passion and converting it into a sacrificial, unconditional desire for Nastasya’s redemption is an attempt at salvation for both Rogozhin and Nastasya. Nastasya, as the object of the desire, now has a figure hoping to redeem her instead of consume her. This reflects Sarah Young’s claim that “there are two centers” to the novel: “Myshkin and Nastas’ia Filippovna. The prince alone does not dominate the narrative, despite his constant presence; it is his relationship with the heroine, who represents the absent center of the text.”

I add Rogozhin to this center as well. His role is similar to Nastasya’s in that his threat, the specter of the murder

Although I do not disagree with this, it does not seem to reach the depth of his humbling of self as his relationship with Rogozhin and Nastasya.

20 Young, Dostoevsky’s Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative, 10.
of both Myshkin and Nastasya, serves as an absent center that everyone must react to. Just as Nastasya and Myshkin are always present even when absent, so too is Rogozhin. Rogozhin, as the purveyor of that perverted desire, now has a figure hoping to redeem that very desire that so consumes Rogozhin himself.

Myshkin’s consistent act in the novel is his attempt to convince Nastasya that she is an honest woman, capable and deserving of more than the “maimed life” that Totsky and the other men around her create. Throughout the course of the novel the prince’s relationship to Nastasya is what leads others to think him useful, simple, idiotic, destructive, or “a little freak.” He accepts all this not to eradicate the passion or position of Rogozhin, but to convert it into Christian love. It is only when we understand this voluntary humbling that Myshkin undergoes because of his attempts at redeeming Nastasya and Rogozhin that we can see him as a holy fool. This recognition of his holy foolishness, his emptying of pride and standing in the eyes of others, then leads us to understand his final disabling as more than the Gothic eradication of the soul or mind. To understand Myshkin as a simple failure is to see his disabling as the
simple, pessimistic conclusion to a failed life. Certainly, however, the constant invoking of Bakhtin in Dostoevsky interpretation must teach us something: his novels are always dialogic, even in death, madness, or idiocy:

in Dostoevsky’s world there are only murders, suicides, and insanity, that is, there are only death-acts, responsively conscious...Dostoevsky does not acknowledge death as an organic process, as something happening to a person without the participation of his responsive consciousness. Personality does not die...The person has departed, having spoken his word, but the word itself remains in the open-ended dialogue.21

Myshkin’s idiocy, separated from the actions of the Christian holy fool, allows him to die and be silenced. As the compassionate actor in the holy fool’s kenosis, however, Myshkin’s “word itself remains in the open-ended dialogue.”

To begin to understand Myshkin as the holy fool we must begin with the duality of Rogozhin and Myshkin, perhaps the first motif established in The Idiot. Both men return to Russia on the Warsaw-Petersburg line, entering the city from a kind of non-location: “It was so damp and foggy that dawn could barely break; ten paces to right or left of the line it was hard to make out anything at all through the carriage windows” (5). The image then is of both men emerging from equally blurred pasts, though their relationship to those pasts is entirely different. Myshkin arrives in Petersburg humbled. He is neither healed from epilepsy nor suffering from it: absent from any sign of a fit, he nevertheless is marked with the disorder: “His eyes were big, blue, and intent; their gaze had something quiet but heavy about it and was filled with that strange expression by which some are able to guess at first sight that the subject has the falling sickness” (6). Nor is Myshkin Russian or Western European. The narrator states, “On his feet he had thick-soled shoes with gaiters—all not the Russian way” (6). His coat is completely inappropriate to the Russian weather, and Myshkin himself is surprised that in the four years he’s
been gone he hasn’t forgotten how to speak his native language. When Lebedev learns Myshkin’s name, he states, “there’s no Prince Myshkins to be met with anywhere, and even the rumors have died out.” Myshkin’s acknowledges this, stating “There are no Prince Myshkins at all now except me; it seems I’m the last one” (9). Myshkin has arisen from the fog in a position of complete humility.

Rogozhin shares many of these characteristics with the prince. He too is returning from Petersburg after a convalescence. Having run away from his tyrannical father for spending his money on Nastasya Filippovna, Rogozhin “fell into delirium.” Like Myshkin, Rogozhin is not fully recovered from his illness, as he is described by the narrator as “still delirious, or at least in a fever” (11), but must return to Petersburg in order to secure his inheritance. An inheritance (though the reader doesn’t know it in the first chapter) is also why Myshkin is returning to Petersburg. Unlike Myshkin, however, Rogozhin is not coming back to Petersburg in any state of humility. Even his very manner of speaking with Myshkin—laughing at the prince’s openness, as well as reveling in telling his past with Nastasya Filippovna—and certainly with Lebedev, assumes a pride and passion
distant from Myshkin’s position. Rogozhin states that when he first met Nastasya Filippovna “sin snared me” (11). There is no repentance in this, however, as Rogozhin invites Myshkin to his coming revelry when the inheritance is his. So here are the two men then, each arriving at their home after a sickness, each receiving an inheritance, but each in entirely different spiritual positions: Myshkin in his oblivious humility, and Rogozhin in his passionate embrace of debauchery. Yet Rogozhin is taken by the prince, and immediately needs him. The narrator states, “Rogozhin himself, for some reason, was especially eager to make the prince his interlocutor” (11). It is hardly coincidental that this need is reported as Rogozhin begins to talk about his father and Nastasya Filippovna. Though the prince asks only one question of Rogozhin during his speech, Rogozhin recounts his history with Nastasya. At the end of this history, Rogozhin states, “Prince, I don’t know why I’ve come to love you. Maybe because I met you at such a moment, though I met [Lebedev] too and don’t love him. Come and see me, Prince….I’ll stuff your pockets with money, and….we’ll go to see Nastasya Filippovna!” (14). Rogozhin cannot intellectually account for his attraction
to the prince, but the connection here is clearly related to Nastasya Filippovna. This first chapter then not only establishes the men as both twins and opposites, but shows their relationship will revolve around Nastasya. Rogozhin doesn’t know why he’s attracted to the prince, just as Raskolnikov doesn’t know why he’s attracted to Sonia, or why Ivan is attracted to his brother Alyosha. All of these passionate nihilists, however, are attracted to their potential salvation in figures who have the power not to silence their passion, but to convert it into something positive. And like Ivan and Alyosha, Rogozhin will not only be attracted to this potential conversion, but for the same reason despise it as well.

The doubling of Rogozhin and Myshkin—or better, the passion of Rogozhin that Myshkin adopts—manifests itself through Nastasya Filippovna. Rogozhin, of course, is not the only man attempting to consume Nastasya. Totsky, General Epanchin, and Ganya all desire Nastasya for their own selfish means: Totsky has used her as a kept woman and now needs to dispose of her, General Epanchin is looking for an exciting mistress, and Ganya hopes to serve his employer the General by marrying him. Although Rogozhin is therefore not alone in his attraction to
Nastasya, he is unique in the overwhelming passion he has for her. He sabotages his own admittedly broken relationship with his father, is unhesitatingly eager to hand over one hundred thousand rubles for the right to Nastasya, and perhaps most importantly is feared by the other men involved in Nastasya’s life as they know nothing will stop Rogozhin from trying to consume his passion.

Myshkin immediately doubles this passion at the first opportunity. Whereas Myshkin recognizes Rogozhin’s relationship to Nastasya as “some sort of sick passion,” he converts this passion into something positive, which is to say a passion to resurrect Nastasya from her “maimed life” through compassion. When Myshkin first sees the portrait of Nastasya, he is standing in the midst of Ganya and General Epanchin who discuss the likelihood that Nastasya will be turned over by Totsky, who originally made her into a “kept woman,” to Ganya for a sham marriage so that the General can have his

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22 Myshkin’s attempt to convert Rogozhin’s passion should be understood within Orthodox theology, where all passions are not to be eradicated as in Buddhism. Instead, as Maximos the Confessor states in *The Philokalia*, “A passion is a movement of the soul contrary to nature.” Myshkin operates (I purposely avoid “realize,” and what it would assume) as a force of re-aligning Rogozhin’s passion, from consumption to compassion.
mistress. Myshkin reverses this cruelty toward Nastasya by seeing her in her portrait as “remarkably good-looking.” He tells Ganya that she has “an astonishing face...And I’m convinced that her fate is no ordinary one. It’s a gay face, but she has suffered terribly, eh? It speaks in her eyes, these two little bones, the two points under her eyes where the cheeks begin” (36).

While Nastasya is the potential object to be passed among the Petersburg elite, to Myshkin she is a suffering human being. He displays his own spiritual acumen when he further recognizes her great danger in the proud vengeance she may want to seek against those men around her by sabotaging her own life: “It’s a proud face, terribly proud, and I don’t know whether she’s kind or not. Ah, if only she were kind! Everything would be saved!” (36). Myshkin, then, is the only one who sees Nastasya as a suffering human being (though he admits he fails at knowing the depths of her suffering). Though Rogozhin’s passion for her certainly surpasses the desire the other men have, he like them seeks to consume her. Rogozhin desires her not even as a predator desires a prey, but out of a much more consuming wickedness. Nastasya, though she refuses to act to her own benefit,
recognizes the motivation of all those around her when she tells those at her name-day party that “The prince is this for me, that I believe in him as the first truly devoted man in my whole life. He believed in me from the first glance, and I trust him” (154).

This devotion to Nastasya is not predicated on any intimate knowledge of her. Myshkin knows her as a woman of suffering, and his first moments alone after seeing her face are to venerate her portrait. In Val Vinokurov’s study on Levinasian ethics in The Idiot, she states that Myshkin “is someone who only truly loves persons as manifestations of an iconic meta-face and not as concrete and individuated faces.” Yet in this moment of Myshkin’s kissing the portrait he clearly echoes the Orthodox veneration of the icon. This veneration is not only a veneration of God, but of the individual saint. Myshkin is not bowing to Nastasya’s beauty here as an echo of the objectification others create, but her personhood, just as he would in venerating an icon. He

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24 Sophie Ollivier states in “Icons in Dostoevsky’s Works” that icons in The Idiot appear only in Ippolit’s “Necessary Explanation.” This is true only if we are searching for those icons that would be
defers to her suffering, and from this moment he is the inverse of Rogozhin’s passion: rather than seeking to consume her, Myshkin seeks to redeem her. This redemption is rooted in making Nastasya overcome the pride that will force her to seek her own demise; said another way, he must make Nastasya believe she is a spiritually resurrected person, absolved from her previous life as a kept woman, and deserving of the compassion Myshkin offers. When Nastasya acts cruelly to General Ivolgin, Myshkin sees past judging her, and instead attempts to remind her that she is capable of more: “And you’re not even ashamed! You can’t be the way you pretended to be just now. It’s not possible” (117). Such behavior toward her is novel for Nastasya, and Myshkin’s struggle to make her believe in her own worth is greater than any rivalry from Rogozhin, General Epanchin, or Ganya.

At her name-day party the shared passion for Nastasya by Rogozhin and the prince is displayed through the simultaneous offers of marriage. The atmosphere of the party is certainly against the prince, as Nastasya identifiable in a church. This moment with Nastasya’s portrait, however, uses the Orthodox icon in order to create its meaning.
has planned the evening as vengeance toward Totsky, General Epanchin, and Ganya by exposing their cruelty to her through her own shameful behavior. Rogozhin’s offer to take Nastasya away is the manifestation of the intent of the party; his offer is Nastasya volunteering herself for her own spiritual destruction. In this lion’s den of sorts, however, Myshkin offers himself as a salvific option away from self-destruction. And although Nastasya admits, as stated above, that she recognizes the peculiarity of the prince’s belief in her, she cannot bring herself to accept his offer. Rogozhin plays the game of the other men and offers one hundred thousand rubles for Nastasya, as though he must purchase her from the Petersburg elite. Myshkin, however, states, “you’re not Rogozhin’s kind” (161). Nastasya asks the prince if his offer of marriage is sincere:

“It’s true,” whispered the prince.

“You’ll take me just as I am, with nothing?”

“I will, Nastasya Filippovna...I’ll take you as an honest woman, Nastasya Filippovna, not as Rogozhin’s kind,” said the prince.

“Me, an honest woman?”
"You." (163)

Nastasya, however, can simply not accept the prince’s offer of compassion. She has already recognized that she must “Either carouse with Rogozhin or go tomorrow and become a washer-woman! Because nothing on me is my own” (163). She momentarily accepts the prince’s offer when she discovers his inheritance, and “an idiot to boot,” and such a decision causes “inexpressible suffering” to Rogozhin. But ultimately, she cannot accept herself worthy of the prince. She is convinced she will corrupt him: “You’re not afraid, but I’d be afraid to ruin you and have you reproach me afterwards...It’s better this way, Prince, truly better, you’d start despising me tomorrow, and there’d be no happiness for us” (169, 170). Knowing that Rogozhin represents self-destruction, she flamboyantly accepts him and leaves the party with her new fiancée’s gang. The prince attempts to run after her.

Both men’s passions continue for the soul of Nastasya. Bakhtin understands the men to be the two voices in Nastasya’s head: “the voice that pronounces her a guilty ‘fallen woman’ and the voice that vindicates and accepts her” (257). The longest confrontation between
these two voices occurs when Myshkin visits Rogozhin’s
home. The entire episode works as another opportunity to
see these men doubled in one another: the one attempting
to redeem, the other unable to withdraw from punishing
the redeemer. When Myshkin gets to the Rogozhin home,
the layout is so labyrinthine that he cannot understand
how he could get out. In the midst of Rogozhin’s tour,
they come across the Holbein painting The Body of the
Christ in the Tomb which hangs above the doorway, a
painting that Myshkin says could make a man lose his
faith. Here then is the confrontation between the two
men: Myshkin, as an icon of the sacrificial lover
attempting to redeem the passions of Rogozhin, and the
Holbein painting, an icon of the un-resurrectible death
of a redeemer. In Orthodox icons only Judas Iscariot and
the devil are painted in profile. Here, the Holbein
painting of the dead Christ leaves the messiah in
profile, the position of the lost. Important is that
Myshkin, in the midst of Rogozhin and this painting that
could make one lose faith, does not lose faith in his
sacrifice for Rogozhin. He allows Rogozhin’s senile
mother to bless him and exchange crosses with him,
despite the fact that Rogozhin’s sinister smile
corresponds with the act. Rather than only see the exchange of crosses as a furthering of the doubled natures of Myshkin and Rogozhin, there is also the possibility of understanding it through Myshkin’s adoption of Rogozhin’s passion. Here, literally taking up a cross, Myshkin “puts on” the passion of Rogozhin. Of course, Rogozhin puts on Myshkin’s cross, and thus carries the hope that Myshkin can redeem Rogozhin of his self-destructive means and ends.

Immediately after this visit to Rogozhin’s home Myshkin suffers his epileptic fit. Many critics have noted that the prince enjoys the enlightenment that comes before the fit, and how this enlightenment nearly makes the epilepsy worthwhile. More important for present purposes, however, is that Myshkin has just returned from Rogozhin’s home, blessed by his senile mother, wearing the cross of his “brother,” and is now plagued with the desire to “forget something present, essential, but with the first glance around him he at once recognized his dark thought again, the thought he had wanted so much to be rid of” (227). Perhaps at this moment we must admit that Myshkin, in this confrontation with the brother he seeks to save, has been lost to him, or infected by him
in a way. Yet in the final moments of enlightenment before the epileptic fit Myshkin’s thoughts are of two things: his own admittedly despicable nature, and Rogozhin’s deep, sincere desire to be saved. The prince thinks,

[Rogozhin] has an immense heart, which is capable of passion and compassion….Compassion will give meaning and understanding to Rogozhin himself. Compassion is the chief and perhaps the only law of being for all mankind. Oh, how unpardonably and dishonorably guilty he was before Rogozhin…For a few warm and heartfelt words in Moscow, Rogozhin called him brother…Rogozhin is not only a passionate soul; he’s a fighter after all: he wants to recover his lost faith by force. He needs it now to the point of torment…Yes! To believe in something! To believe in somebody! (230-31)

The prince, admonished by Rogozhin in his house for not recognizing the depth of Nastasya’s suffering, suddenly sees clearly the hope he believes Rogozhin still has. These thoughts also lead to his own guilt about wanting to see Nastasya Filippovna. It must be assumed that “the
little demon” that whispers to the prince here is due to his desire to see Nastasya not as her compassionate redeemer, but to ignite the jealousy of Rogozhin who watches from afar. This realization of his “little demon” leads to his desire “to go right then to Rogozhin’s, to wait for him, to embrace him with shame, with tears, to tell him everything and be done with it all at once” (233). It is a gesture that reminds one of Zosima’s famous admission of guilt for the sins of all. To understand Myshkin needing to go to Rogozhin’s for confession is to understand his desire to redeem Rogozhin. Here Myshkin sees Rogozhin’s perversion as his own sin as well, one that needs open contrition. Of course, he never gets the chance to return to Rogozhin, as Rogozhin himself is waiting in the dark to murder him. The prince is only saved by the full onset of the epileptic fit just as Rogozhin is about to strike. The entire scene, from the moment that the prince comes to Rogozhin’s home, is a confrontation between the desire for selfless love and the cynical acceptance of Rogozhin’s devilishness. Myshkin’s final phrase, “Parfyon, I don’t believe it!” has led to various interpretations. In this reading, it is a statement of
hope, a response to his earlier cynicism toward Rogozhin’s unstoppable desire. If this leaves the prince naïve and helpless so be it, but he remains in the face of Rogozhin’s attempt to consume him as the sacrificial brother to the man with whom he exchanges crosses.

From the opening of the novel until Rogozhin’s murder of Nastasya, the prince adopts his friend’s passion, utterly convinced he can redeem it, and in the process save Nastasya from her voluntary consumption through Rogozhin. This then, is the prince’s kenotic act. It is not his idiocy but his willingness to pursue Nastasya by all means in order to redeem her. When she first runs away with Rogozhin, General Epanchin tells the prince, “Good heavens, Prince, come to your senses! Drop it! You see what she’s like! I’m speaking as a father” (174). Myshkin promptly ignores this reputation-saving advice by rushing after Nastasya. He falls into disfavor with the Epanchin women because of his continual pursuit of her. Engaged to Aglaya Epanchin, the prince eventually rejects her at the moment Nastasya seems to desire the prince, and Evgeny Pavlovich Radomsky tells him, “How far can compassion go, then?...Is it possible, while loving a girl, to humiliate her so before her
rival, to abandon her for the other one, right in front of that other one, after making her an honorable proposal yourself” (581). It is not the prince’s epilepsy and rumored idiocy that make him a holy fool; this is an involuntary condition that may initially create mockery from others, but is eventually endured with patience by most. Madame Epanchin sees him as a kind of son, and when he breaks her precious Chinese vase she in no way reacts viciously as was predicted by Aglaya. What brings out the viciousness of Madame Epanchin, just as it brings out the derision and misunderstanding of others, is the unending pursuit of Nastasya Filippovna despite her duplicity and at times outrageously cruel behavior. The prince always sees her as saintly, and because of this he loses social reputation. The prince is at one time engaged to Aglaya Epanchin, a woman who clearly loves him, and a favorable life of privilege and luxury awaits him. This is rejected, however, and this rejection is the action of the holy fool. His holy foolishness rests in his voluntary humbling, and this is in his obsessive pursuit of Nastasya, a holy version of the passion that Rogozhin has for the same woman.
Mental Disability and Myshkin

If Myshkin as a holy fool needed to be recognized before any examination of his disabling into complete "idiocy," at least a cursory review should be made as to how idiocy as a concept is seen throughout the novel. This must begin with the relationship of epilepsy to Myshkin’s final disabling, since, as the notebooks point out, Dostoevsky understood the two to be separate yet related.

Dostoevsky himself suffered from epilepsy, and for a century critics have focused on the writer’s experience with the disease and its several appearances in his major fiction. Dostoevsky had his own ambivalent feelings toward the disease, revealing both the "medical demonization" of the epileptic, as well as participating in the "myth of the epileptic genius."25 Dostoevsky describes the feelings of an approaching epileptic fit with fantastic, near-religious language, yet the mental and physical effects of such a fit he shows to be

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devastating.\textsuperscript{26} Part of these physical effects is seen in his belief that complete cognitive loss could occur as a consequence of severe epilepsy and mental distress. Suffering himself from epilepsy while he worked on \textit{The Idiot}, Dostoevsky wrote to Dr. Stepan Yanovsky, “this epilepsy will end up by carrying me off. My star is fading—I realize that. My memory has grown completely dim (completely!). I don’t recognize people anymore. I forget what I read the day before. I’m afraid of going mad or falling into idiocy.”\textsuperscript{27} Relevant to present purposes is not only that Dostoevsky recognizes a difference between epilepsy and mental disability, but that he sees the former causing the latter. Myshkin has epilepsy throughout the novel, but mental disability is something that he must work to avoid; he partially succeeds at this through therapy in Switzerland, but of course succumbs to a permanent mental disability by the end of the novel. Epilepsy in \textit{The Idiot} therefore acts

\textsuperscript{26} The unique status of the “sacred disease” is an ancient one. R.C. Scheerenberger quotes Hippocrates (4\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.E.) refuting the idea that epilepsy has a divine connection, implying that such a belief had credence in Ancient Greece: “I am about to discuss the disease called sacred. It is not in my opinion any more divine or more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause, and its supposed divine origin is due to man’s inexperience and to their wonder at its peculiar character” (15).

\textsuperscript{27} Quoted in Frank, \textit{Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years}, 244.
as a sword of Damocles hanging above Myshkin. How this threat is expressed in the novel’s discourse, however, leads to the recognition that mental disability may promise as much as it threatens.

The position of the narrator in regards to Myshkin’s mental state effectively creates the criteria for the condition to be feared, yet without using the expected Gothic tropes that occur in previous texts. The narrator is complicated in The Idiot, seemingly moving from an omniscient voice that has depth of knowledge about Myshkin and others to one that must rely on conjecture and guess work. Robin Feuer Miller’s work on the narration of The Idiot leads her to the conclusion that there are “four separate modes of narration coexisting within the novel: a comic voice that relates a kind of novel of manners (or ill-manners), a Gothic voice that employs techniques of arbitrary disclosure and heightened terror, the voice of a sympathetic and omniscient narrator, and a voice that is ironically detached from the action and easily swayed by the current local rumors.”  

None of these modes of narration particularly stress Myshkin’s past idiocy or present struggles with

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28 Miller, Dostoevsky and The Idiot, 8.
epilepsy. The Gothic voice of the text is used for Rogozhin’s presence, along with his ancillary associations: his home, his painting of the dead Christ, his senile mother, etc. Even in the bridal chamber with the murdered Nastasya Filippovna, Dostoevsky uses Gothic tropes to attempt to intensify the scene, but that intensity does not center on Myshkin’s loss of cognitive ability. Whereas *Melmoth the Wanderer*’s narrator hyperbolically warns about the horrors of mental disability in order to induce fear, and Charlie Gordon wrings his hands from inevitability to create the same in the reader, the narrator of *The Idiot* remains strangely quiet about the threat to Myshkin’s well-being. Nor is the narrator’s “sympathetic and omniscient” voice particularly worrisome about the possible weakened state of Myshkin’s mind. By in large the narrator allows other characters to speak of Myshkin’s mental ability, whether it is Myshkin himself in his own humbling self-portraits, or other characters’ at times selfish and mocking views. The lack of the narrator pausing to give us a detailed description of Myshkin’s past as disabled, or the fragile stability of his present mental state stresses the reader’s feeling that Myshkin’s very personhood is
unknown. He cannot narrate his past idiocy because he was an idiot; other characters cannot narrate his past idiocy because he has emerged to them as though out of a fog, leaving only their gossip and conjecture to rely upon. In the narrator’s absence of authority, Myshkin and his mental ability belong to the language of others.

When Myshkin’s past idiocy or present struggles with epilepsy do arise, the language of that mental ability by these other characters is initially shrouded in shame or mockery. There is no question that in the text to be an idiot or epileptic is to be socially compromised, and in no way suggests a hidden bastion of wisdom or goodness.

When Myshkin first speaks with General Epanchin, the latter is so convinced of Myshkin’s mental impairment that he tells him, “it would be better for you to avoid pocket money and generally carrying money in your pocket. I say it just from looking at you” (35). Just before the general passes the prince to his wife and daughters, he tells them, “he’s almost like a child, though he’s cultivated” (52). This leads to a discussion of playing games on/with the prince, so that when he does arrive in the drawing room Madame Epanchin fears him drooling and collapsing onto the floor. Nastasya mocks the prince in
the same way, telling her friend Darya Alexeevna, “Should I have ruined him? How can he get married, he still needs a nursemaid himself; so the general will be his nursemaid—look how he dangles after him” (170). Clearly Nastasya’s motivation for such mockery is complicated, yet her readiness to refer to him as a fool and a child suggests that all those around her have little difficulty in seeing the prince the same way.

If others have an overwhelmingly negative view toward idiocy, Myshkin’s own voice is hardly any more positive. Though he doesn’t mock his past or present, he does fear it. In the absence of a narrator creating the villainous presence of idiocy, Myshkin himself fills the void. When speaking with the Epanchin daughters he gives the most complete description of his past mental condition, and he uses language of horror to do it. It is a description Melmoth could have used in order to horrify Stanton: “I always lapsed into a total stupor, lost my memory completely, and though my mind worked, the logical flow of thought was as if broken. I couldn’t put more than two or three ideas together coherently. So it seems to me...I remember a feeling of terrible sadness; I even wanted to weep; I was surprised and anxious all the
time...I was completely awakened from that darkness” (56). When Aglaya Epanchin wants the prince to make a fool of himself at the engagement party, he begins to fear what his mind will do to him. When Aglaya mentions the Chinese vase, the prince knows he will not be able to control himself: he’ll do the very thing he doesn’t want to.

The only positive understanding of idiocy throughout the novel occurs when others realize they can use Myshkin’s weakness for their own respective gains. This is not to suggest that characters are never kind to him out of their own generosity; Kolya Ivolgin and Vera Lebedev are consistently selfless with the prince, yet their generosity is not because of Myshkin’s mental state (perceived or otherwise) but because of his own sincerity and kindness. Evgeny Pavlovich Radomyiski is one of the few characters consistently honest with the prince, believing him capable of understanding criticism or interrogation. For a character, however, to actually see a positive aspect of a compromised intellect is only because of the ease in manipulation. When General Epanchin first tells the prince that he will look out for him, it’s because “I even have some intention concerning
you” (35). Though the prince has no idea, as readers we understand that the general’s initial intention with the prince is as a distraction so that his wife will not find out about a relationship with Nastasya Filippovna. The general’s daughter Aglaya operates in much the same way when she manipulates the prince into an engagement. There are hints that she is happily avenging herself against her parents, as is evidenced in her initial announcement that brings her parents to tears and she to laughter, as well as her advice to the prince to act idiotically at the party, and to break the Chinese vase that is so valuable to her mother. After she has allowed the prince to embarrass himself in front of others, she tells her family, “I’ve never given him any sort of promise, and never in my life considered him my fiancé. He’s as much a stranger to me as anyone else” (554). Aglaya’s sincere affection for the prince is well established in the chapters that follow, but her intended marriage to him works to enrage her parents precisely because of how Myshkin’s mental ability is perceived.

Therefore within the text mental disability exists as a disturbing, rhetorical threat woven into the language of every character, not simply Myshkin. The
threat of Myshkin’s idiocy, as well as his past experience with it, pervades interactions between the characters, generally representing the different strains of discord in the novel. With Myshkin standing at the center of the text and his mental state his crown of thorns. Malcolm Jones writes that throughout Dostoevsky’s works, no less in *The Idiot*, is “the principle of the inappropriate and it is one of the chief means which Dostoyevsky employs to create tension, embarrassment, scandal, and the breakdown of order. Characters may behave in ways inappropriate to the occasion, to their station, to circumstances, to their thoughts, to their feelings, to the truth.”

Of course this characterizes Myshkin and his compromised intellect breaking vases, making impossible deals with two women, and naively entering into relationships with those dangerous to him. At the same time, however, it characterizes other characters as they speak about Myshkin, about his capability, and about how they will use him or how they must protect him. Bakhtin states, “The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to

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develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others.”

Myshkin’s (perceived) mental state penetrates the language of all characters in order to give birth to other ideas. It stands like a crucible in every character; without the reader being informed by the narrator of Myshkin’s past, and with others overwhelmingly understanding his mental state to be a source of mockery or gullibility, and with Myshkin himself fearing the prospect of mental collapse, mental disability haunts the pages more than Rogozhin’s eyes or knife. Yet if Dostoevsky’s narrative is always dialogic, then his use of disability is, as well. Recognizing that Myshkin’s attempts to save Nastasya and Rogozhin come as the acts of a holy fool, and that the threat of disability penetrates the novel with discord and fear, it is now possible to provide a reading of the novel’s penultimate scene where the prince and Rogozhin linger over the corpse of Nastasya, and Myshkin himself descends into a permanent idiocy.

Bakhtin, Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 88.
The Limits of Language

Having fled with Rogozhin from her wedding with the prince, Nastasya is murdered in the Gothic house of the dead Christ painting. Myshkin instinctively knows what has happened before even leaving the church of his intended wedding ceremony. This time, knowing that Nastasya has chosen Rogozhin for the final time, he lingers in melancholy as the aborted wedding turns into a shameless party. The prince plans to go to Petersburg the next day, but “In his opinion, he might come back [to Pavlosk] that same day” (596), an admission that there is nothing more to be done for Nastasya.

Once the prince tracks down Rogozhin in his own home, the two men’s relationship is nearly reversed in their final moments with the dead body of Nastasya. The two symbolic brothers need not even waste time on discussing anything but the particulars of what Rogozhin has done. The prince is filled with an unnamable fear, but Rogozhin, his passion for consuming Nastasya fulfilled, is suddenly desperate for the prince’s support, as though this passion, so long the defining feature of his personhood, has now left him empty. The
prince, existing in a kind of daze, is aloof from Rogozhin’s needy motions. Absent is his mental enlightenment that comes before the epileptic fit, or even his recognition of an epileptic fit. Here epilepsy is particularly missing, as though what Myshkin is about to encounter is no longer what might cause idiocy, but idiocy itself. Rogozhin fixes the bed so they can lie down together, “and he absolutely wanted to make up beds now side by side, and that was why, with great effort, he now dragged pillows of various sizes from both sofas all the way across the room...he went over to the prince, took him tenderly and rapturously by the arm, got him to his feet, and led him to bed” (608). The prince awkwardly questions Rogozhin about the details of the murder, yet realizes “he had not been talking about what he needed to talk about” (610). He instead bends over top of Rogozhin and soothes him to the best of his ability. In the final moments of the prince’s awareness, the two men merge more than they have through common passions and shared crosses: “he finally lay down on the pillows, as if quite strengthless now and in despair, and pressed his face to the pale and motionless face of Rogozhin; tears flowed from his eyes onto Rogozhin’s cheeks, but perhaps by then
he no longer felt his own tears and knew nothing about them” (611). At this final moment Myshkin’s own power has left him, and an idiocy, indicated by “[he] knew nothing,” has begun.

The prince’s attempt to save Nastasya through a holy version of Rogozhin’s passion has obviously failed since the object of that passion, both righteous and perverted, is now dead. Yet to understand Myshkin’s collapse into idiocy as a failure of the person or of the narrative is to desire the prince to be the metaphorical judge, jury, and executioner of Rogozhin. This is simply not a possible position for the holy fool or for Myshkin. Ivan Esaulov states “the impossibility of judging the Other follows another particular feature of Dostoevsky’s poetics: the problematical nature of the finalisation of the Other.”31 Myshkin cannot in horror back away from Rogozhin, thus severing the connection they’ve had throughout the novel, as well as severing Myshkin’s attempt to redeem his “brother.” There is no ceasing of their doubling, so the attempt to redeem Rogozhin through

active Christian love cannot stop. In Dostoevsky’s *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, he writes,

“Understand me: a voluntary, totally conscious sacrifice of oneself in the interests of all, made under no sort of compulsion, is in my opinion a sign of the highest development of the personality. Voluntarily to sacrifice one’s life for all, to die on the cross or at the stake, is possible only with the strongest development of the personality.”

It is precisely this idea that Myshkin performs. He indeed is unable to save Nastasya, but rather than the cynical, weak reaction of turning on Rogozhin in his weakest moment, Myshkin continues his kenotic act toward Rogozhin. Rather than abandoning his brother he abandons his self. Before the prince puts his head to Rogozhin’s and the tears of the two men mingle, Myshkin looks over his “brother” with a necessary compassion as Rogozhin’s final description is that of a delirious man: “the prince quietly bent over him, sat down beside him, and with a pounding heart, breathing heavily, began to examine him...Now and then Rogozhin sometimes suddenly began to mutter, loudly, abruptly, and

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incoherently; began to exclaim and laugh; then the prince would reach out his trembling hand to him and quietly touch his head, his hair, stroke it and stroke his cheeks...there was nothing more he could do” (610-11).

Rogozhin is lost, but not abandoned. Myshkin’s mental collapse mirrors Rogozhin’s own mental collapse. Myshkin, wearing the cross of Rogozhin, takes on the fate of Rogozhin as well. Deprived of his passion because of his consumption of it, Rogozhin becomes a shell. Myshkin inverts this: he too becomes a vacated shell though not due to the consumption of the other, but due to compassionate love of the other.

The inability of language to represent the experience of love is emphasized from the very beginning of the novel.. When Myshkin tries to explain the beauty of the donkey’s bray he completely fails. The sound of the donkey forces him out of his mental fog, yet his words to describe why a donkey prove inadequate: “I became convinced at once that they’re most useful animals, hardworking, strong, patient, cheap, enduring; and because of that ass I suddenly took a liking to the whole of Switzerland, so that my former sadness went away entirely” (56). All the Epanchin women can do to such a
statement is ridicule the prince. When at Rogozhin’s house Myshkin attempts to explain Christianity through the four anecdotes of the murderers and mothers, he knows Rogozhin does not understand him. He states of the inadequacy of relating true religion, “the essence of religious feeling doesn’t fit in with any reasoning...there’s something in it that atheisms will eternally glance off, and they will eternally be talking not about that” (221). Miller states that throughout the novel, “the implied author wields his novelistic theme about the inability of language to convey an idea accurately...Myshkin tries to meet the atheist on his own terms by arguing with him. The result, predictably, is that Myshkin’s words also fail to convince.”

Previous actions of Myshkin’s prove that the prince lacks an ability to distinguish his desires through language, so that when they are expressed they come across impossible and naïve. After Myshkin has abandoned Aglaya for Nastasya, Evgeny Radomsky confronts the prince about his true desires: “Is it possible, while loving a girl, to humiliate her before her rival, to abandon her for the other one, right in front of that other one,

33 Miller, Dostoevsky and The Idiot, 184.
after making her an honorable proposal yourself” (581).
The prince is unable to make Evgeny understand how he can want to marry Nastasya and Aglaya both with perfectly honorable and sincere wishes. To Myshkin, language fails him in the midst of the man most consistently sympathetic with him:

“I love [Nastasya] with all my soul! She’s...a child; now she’s a child, a complete child! Oh, you don’t know anything!”

“And at the same time you assured Aglaya Ivanovna of your love?”

“Oh yes, yes!”

“How’s that? So you want to love them both?”

“Oh, yes, yes!”

“Good heavens, Prince, what are you saying? Come to your senses!” (583)

Of course the prince cannot come to his senses because his problem lies not in his desire to actively love both women, but in language’s inability to express the desire to save Nastasya in love and to live a domestic life with Aglaya in love as well.
In the penultimate scene with Nastasya’s body, Myshkin repeats this failure of language: “he suddenly realized that at that moment, and for a long time now, he had not been talking about what he needed to talk about, and had not been doing what he needed to do” (610). As Miller states above, Myshkin’s words continue to “fail to convince” Rogozhin. His final act then is completely language-less. It is a kenotic act that surely will be disrespected and misunderstood by those around him.

Harriet Murav sees this disrespect and misunderstanding to exist in the narrator as well, stating, “the reading staged by the narrator at the end of the novel understands Dostoevsky’s ‘wholly beautiful individual’ solely in terms of pathology.” To read this ending as pathology is to see Myshkin as a permanently useless broken man, and by extension his religious mission as nothing more than the Gothic void married “to the Abyss.” Yet Myshkin has abandoned language, voluntarily or involuntarily, but has continued to argue with the atheist through kenosis. Myshkin throughout the novel has been a holy fool for Rogozhin, and here in the last moment with him he takes on the lowest, most humbled

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34 Murav, Holy Foolishness, 94.
position of the entire novel: the feared, disrespected role/language of the idiot.

Of course, just as Myshkin fails to save Nastasya’s life, Rogozhin is not saved through this kenosis by the holy fool, and this may cause some to balk at such a reading. This hesitation, however, must ignore the fact that within the narrative we have seen a similar holy fool act with absolutely no lasting positive results, yet the impact of the holy fool remains. Few find the narrative of Myshkin’s “first love,” Poor Marie, to be fruitless or destructive. Poor Marie is seduced and dishonored by a traveling salesman, and when the entire town heaps coals on her she “endured it all, and...approved of it herself and considered herself the lowest sort of creature” (69). She does not resist the mockery and abuse of the entire town (including from her own mother), and humbles herself instead of enduring the abuse through the pride of the mistreated. Myshkin’s role in the story is less of holy fool, and more of holy audience. His experience with Marie occurs during his recovery with Schneider while he is called an idiot and “a perfect child,” both titles he openly speaks against. Rehabilitating from his idiocy, he therefore shows
compassion on Marie with no concern about how the rest of the town treats him for it. Initially the children heap abuse on him for his compassion, but Myshkin’s resilience eventually converts the children to Marie’s caretakers. After Marie’s death Myshkin is persecuted by the town. What change has been effected then? Marie was always despised, and remains despised after her death. The prince, who managed to provide Marie with displays of affection through himself and the children, is persecuted by the town just as Marie was. Much like some readers and critics would like to assign the prince for ruining lives and effecting no change, the same charge must be leveled on Marie. Yet the story of Marie is the story of the holy fool, voluntarily humbled to receive the scorn and judgment of others, yet nevertheless unceasing in the display of compassionate love. It is this compassionate love of Myshkin who rather than abandon Rogozhin continues to love. In the epilogue Rogozhin operates during his trial like a pithed man. He “did not add anything of his own” to the opinion of his lawyers that he suffered from brain fever at the time, and when he heard the sentence sat “sternly, silently, and ‘pensively’” (612). There is little of the former
Parfyon Rogozhin left, just as there is little of the
Prince Myshkin left. Myshkin has followed Rogozhin,
through the actions of the holy fool, into brain fever,
or in Myshkin’s case idiocy.

There are, of course, those more minor character
that Myshkin has clearly influenced for the better.
Kolya Ivolgin and Vera Lebedev, as well as the archetypal
Russian landowner Evgeny Radomsky who continues to visit
the prince despite the fact that he is no longer
recognized. In regards to these characters Bruce French
sees a more sentimentalized reading than I intend: “death
does not remove him from the hearts and lives of those
with whom he came into spiritual contact. He is
resurrected in their lives, in their hearts, and in their
hearts, and in their bodies.”

To rely on these
characters and the idea that Myshkin somehow still exists
within them, however, is to engage in the legalistic
spirituality that qualifies Christian love through
quantity. Myshkin indeed has failed to save Nastasya and
Rogozhin, but his descent into idiocy is not the result
of that failure. While idiocy remains here as in Maturin

35 Bruce French, Dostoevsky’s Idiot: Dialogue and the Spiritually
Good Life (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 213.
a state of annihilation, it is nevertheless the result of the loving act of complete kenosis. It is not the pitiful state of a wounded savior who has hobbled off to die as Holbein’s painting would suggest. Instead it is the complete sacrificial love that is arguably more demonstrative in Dostoevsky’s final work, *The Brothers Karamazov*, yet nevertheless present here. Like Pip in *Moby-Dick*, its presence offers a path toward transcendence over the cruelty and selfishness that dominates other characters in the novel. Myshkin ends *The Idiot* outside of language and consciousness, but to repeat Bakhtin from earlier: “there are only death-acts, responsively conscious...Dostoevsky does not acknowledge death as an organic process, as something happening to a person without the participation of his responsive consciousness. Personality does not die...The person has departed, having spoken his word, but the word itself remains.” Myshkin does not rise from the Gothic tomb of idiocy, but the voice of love remains, as does his sacrifice for Rogozhin and Nastasya, testified to by that very degree of horror that without Myshkin’s sacrifice is inherent in idiocy.
CHAPTER VI

THE USELESS LACKEY: MENTAL DISABILITY AND INADEQUACY IN JOSEPH CONRAD’S THE SECRET AGENT

In the previous four texts mental disability serves as a fundamental part of the novel’s discourse through its creation of horror in other characters and the reader. In Melmoth the Wanderer and Flowers for Algernon there is nothing but the horror of vacated humanity that mental disability creates: its expression is the expressionlessness of the condition. In Moby-Dick and The Idiot that same horror exists, yet the frightening circumstances of that horror also expresses an alternative to a world of maddening, self-destructive passions. The following two texts of this study, Joseph Conrad’s The Secret Agent and Carson McCullers’s The Heart is a Lonely Hunter do not use mental disability as a source of horror, but do operate under a similar underlying principle: mental disability is an empty vessel to be made flesh by thematic content.¹ Therefore unlike previous texts which use the idea of the vacuity

¹ It is no coincidence that the latter four novels in this study present mental disability as a congenital condition. Part of the horror of mental disability in the other novels is the realization by other characters that they too could become disabled.
of mental disability to be a primary function in the discourse, one that is created by and creates horror, in the following two chapters that same emptiness implicitly exists, except that it is “filled,” so that the mentally disabled character becomes the physical embodiment of an idea. Without language and consistent force of will, the mentally disabled character is rhetorically pliable, readily made into a metaphor. It is no coincidence, given the stereotypical characteristics of the mentally disabled, that in both *The Secret Agent* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* the respective mentally disabled characters, Stevie and Spiros Antonopoulos, operate as representations of insularity and uselessness. As has been implicit throughout this study, however, such representations of the mentally disabled do not exist apart from the novels’ aesthetic. They cannot be ethically judged until their role as part of the discourse is evaluated.

Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* is subtitled “A Simple Tale,” though the moniker barely fits even when applied to the basic plot of the novel. The book’s protagonist, Adolf Verloc, is a mediocre secret agent for a foreign government living in London. Verloc disguises
his secret life by running a pornographic shop that doubles as the meeting room for a roundtable of philosophical anarchists. When Verloc is commanded by his employer to detonate a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory, he enlists his mentally disabled brother-in-law Stevie for the job. Stevie, however, trips on his way to the Observatory and succeeds only in blowing himself up. When Verloc’s wife eventually discovers her husband’s involvement, she murders him and attempts to flee with one of his anarchist colleagues. In his “Author’s Note” to the novel, Conrad explains the inspiration for writing the novel. At the center of the novel, even in such an embryonic phase, is the idiot-figure that Stevie would represent:

[Ford Madox Ford and I] recalled the already old story of the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced
by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing
even most remotely resembling an idea,
anarchistic or other. As to the outer wall of
the Observatory it did not show as much as the
faintest crack...I pointed all this out to my
friend who remained silent for a while and then
remarked in his characteristically casual and
omniscient manner: "Oh, that fellow was half an
idiot. His sister committed suicide
afterwards." These were absolutely the only
words that passed between us; for extreme
surprise at this unexpected piece of
information kept me dumb for a moment and he
began at once to talk of something else.²

Consistent throughout this explanation by Conrad is his
bafflement at the illogical nature of blowing up the
Observatory. The revelation that the bomber was mentally
disabled seems to provide the writer with a profound
answer. This passage could illuminate why Conrad uses
Stevie as the delivery man: it is apparently what
actually occurred at the real event, and it is shockingly

further references to this edition are given in the text.
appropriate to Conrad given the absurd nature of the bombing. More important than these conclusions, however, is how the passage reveals the relationship of the mentally disabled to the other characters in the novel. Though they are only implicit in the above passage, Conrad develops *The Secret Agent* to be an episode of weakness and obliviousness in both the political and domestic spheres. Stevie’s disability then correlates with those who otherwise would be the political and domestic masters of early 20th century London. In the inadequacies that constitute Stevie’s mental disability—his response to unattainable desires, his failure to be of use to those he needs, and his distance from the characters who surround him—one finds the metaphorical embodiment of the inadequacies of those characters who directly and indirectly conspire toward his destruction.

**Stevie and the Limits of Ability**

Unlike some of the other mentally disabled characters in this study, Stevie has received a fair amount of critical attention in readings of the novel. His death is universally seen as the central event in the
book, but how that death should be conceptualized does not have near the same unanimous treatment. Critics such as Joseph Wiesenfarth find something particularly Christ-like in Stevie’s function as sacrificial victim. Monika Majewska reads Stevie through a lens of Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot*, commenting on and attempting to disrupt the order of an ugly world. Others such as Ellen Burton Harrington see Stevie as a kind of Professor, so that the two form the book’s twin pillars of false or incomplete morality in an immoral world. The conclusions of these critics are less important for present purposes than their methodology of reaching them. Interpretations of Stevie treat mental disability as a monolithic, ornamental dimension of character. For the formalist attention F.R. Leavis gives Conrad in *The Great Tradition*, no attention is paid to Stevie’s disability other than the label “half-witted.” Other phrases describing Stevie’s disability—“idiot,” “imperfect form”—all attempt to explain the role of his disability by assigning a euphemism.

What critical discussion there is which centers specifically on Stevie’s disability is generally intended to explain how Conrad created Stevie through the
contemporary culture. The anarchist Ossipon is a student of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, and frequently quotes him when referring to Stevie’s degeneracy: “He was an extraordinary lad, that brother of yours. Most interesting to study. A perfect type in a way. Perfect” (238). Although Yundt attacks Ossipon for his use of Lombroso’s theory, critic John Saveson catalogues all the physical characteristics given of Stevie and finds that they do correspond with Lombroso’s understanding of the degenerate. In the same manner, Martin Ray sees more of Max Nordau’s Degeneracy in the descriptions of Stevie, as well as all the anarchists. Ray recognizes that Conrad himself disagreed with Nordau, but nevertheless used Nordau in all sincerity to be one of “the various sources” that constitute all the characters of the novel. Ray states that using Nordau “lessens the gap between outraged author and outrageous anarchists, and the reduction of this gap permits him to speak of the anarchists...in pity as well as in scorn.”³ While attempts to find the blueprint for Stevie’s creation are not

counterproductive, they do not necessarily reveal the role of disability within the discourse of the novel.⁴

One of the defining characteristics of Stevie is the personal failures and unmet desires that his disability explicitly causes him. Although Stevie exists in a very small world, defined by the streets he crosses on his menial errands and the people who enter Verloc’s shop, his desires are nevertheless enormous in their scale. Perhaps the most immense and prevalent desire that Stevie expresses is an end to cruelty and suffering. When Stevie witnesses the cabman’s whipping of the horse, he not only calls out “Poor brute!” but “Poor man!” as well. He wishes for the horse’s pain to stop, and in his own simplified way, for the economic pressures on the cabman to stop as well. Stevie’s often-quoted line, “Bad world for poor people!” is indicative of the immensity of this desire, held not only for animals but for people. This type of desire to end suffering does not have any kind of rational outlet. Instead, the inability to act upon that desire sends Stevie into hysterics, as when the anarchist

⁴ Mieke Bal’s discussion of character in Narratology: An Introduction speaks to the complexity of qualifying characters through their relation to other characters, the narration, events, and settings. Author’s intent, while in some ways illuminating, does not address this complexity.
Karl Yundt talks to his political colleagues about applying hot iron to the skin. Stevie drops his paper of scribbled circles and “remained staring at the old terrorist, as if rooted suddenly to the spot by his morbid horror and dread of physical pain” (58). When Ossipon, the youngest anarchist of the group that meets in Verloc’s shop, speaks about economic factors making cannibals of people, Stevie cannot conceptualize the idea of figurative language. Disabled and unable to either communicate or understand another’s communication, he “at once, as though it had been swift poison, sank limply in a sitting posture on the steps of the kitchen door” (60). Of Stevie’s inability to see pain, the narrator states that cruelty to horses could induce Stevie to “shriek piercingly in a crowd,” and when boys taunt him with tales of “injustice and oppression” they “wrought his compassion to the pitch of that frenzy” (29).

The desire for Stevie to end cruelty is frustrated by his own incapacity to understand others, to communicate his horror, and to act in a productive way. Of course, if he were of sound mind, he still would be unable to prevent cruelty to horses or socioeconomic pressure on the poor as his desires expand beyond the
domestic sphere. Nevertheless his disability seemingly causes his illogical, unproductive reactions to cruelty. Stevie can never conceive of any plan that will actually cease the cruelty or the suffering: when he witnesses the beating of the horse he climbs down the carriage while in motion, when he is in a crowd and sees cruelty he shrieks, and when boys tell him about cruelty he lights fireworks. It is through this thwarted desire to end cruelty, and the accompanying illogical, impotent response to it, that Stevie’s idiocy embodies those that surround him. Just as Stevie can do nothing to alleviate suffering, the anarchists of Verloc’s shop are plagued by inactivity; they are capable and adept at what Stevie is not, language and communication, yet their inability or unwillingness to act on that ability makes their words as hollow and empty as Stevie’s shrieks and exploding fireworks.

Other critics have connected Stevie, who wants to end the order that creates such cruelty, to the anarchists. Jetty de Vries states it unequivocally: “It is no doubt right to say that Stevie (at least in one respect) is...a ‘true anarchist’ as distinguished from
the...‘pseudo-anarchist’ Verloc.” Martin Ray states the most prevalent reason for a connection between Stevie and the anarchists: “it should come as no surprise to realize that Stevie is the only true anarchist in the book, the only one who actually explodes a bomb, for Conrad has shown him to possess the necessary traits of Nordau’s degenerate anarchist.” This connection between Stevie and the anarchists in regards to their degeneracy—the fat Michaelis, the impotent Yundt, the idiot Stevie—seems to be a more shallow similarity between the characters. All of them reveal a physical grotesqueness, but that is more helpful when seen as a reflection of their supposed desires to end cruelty, as well as their responses to it: for the anarchists more impotent, back-room talk in a pornographic shop visited only by deviants, and for Stevie, more screaming and collapsing onto the floor.

Michaelis leads the list of anarchists as he is constantly described as a man unable to accomplish anything, despite his best efforts. Like so many other characters in the book, Michaelis is described as obese.

and lazy, unable to truly do anything for the anarchists’ cause. The narrator describes his voice as being “deadened and oppressed by the layer of fat on his chest” (53). The very actions of Michaelis’ body are described as pointless by the narrator, as when the ticket-of-leave apostle is described as “Round like a distended balloon, he opened his short, thick arms, as if in a pathetically hopeless attempt to embrace and hug to his breast a self-regenerated universe. He gasped with ardour” (59). Such language not only speaks to Michaelis’ physical inadequacy, but his philosophical inadequacy as well.

Even Michaelis’ patroness finds his actions senseless, considering him “nonsense” (103). The patroness goes on to describe Michaelis as essentially harmless to the social order, and barely a self-sufficient human being: “The poor creature is obviously no longer in a position to take care of himself. Somebody will have to look after him a little” (103).

Karl Yundt is described in terms no less damning in their criticism of a man who is supposed to want to end “the pretty branding instrument invented by the overfed to protect themselves against the hungry” (57). The narrator describes him as having “worn-out passion,
resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile sensualist” (54). Although Ossipon certainly comes across with more gravity than the other revolutionaries, he is no less inadequate in stopping cruelty and suffering, if for no other reason than he actively causes it. Ossipon deceives Winnie into thinking he will run away with her, saving her from the gallows that horrify her. Of course he does nothing but indirectly cause her suicide as he leaves her alone with no money and no place to go.

Verloc’s relationship with the anarchists also suggests that the men who meet in his shop are little more than idle talkers. Vladimir, Verloc’s foreign government contact, explains to him that the scapegoat for the attack on the Observatory will be London anarchists. This suggests that Vladimir is fully aware that the movement in London is not a politically strong one (otherwise he would not have his frustration at their lack of action, which prevents his political manipulation of that action), and that Verloc has very little loyalty attached to the movement. He not only sees the emptiness of the anarchists (thus his need to use Stevie as a partner), but he recognizes all their blather as a
failure to realize any anarchist goals. Verloc muses, “With the insight of a kindred temperament he pronounced his verdict. A lazy lot...Karl Yundt, nursed by a blear-eyed old woman...Michaelis...the ex-prisoner could moon about the shady lanes for days together in a delicious and humanitarian idleness...Ossipon, that beggar was sure to want for nothing as long as there were silly girls with savings-bank books in the world” (61).

The irony (or at least part of it) of all the anarchists is that they do nothing to end the social order they believe causes such suffering. When they do attempt something, whether it be in the propaganda leaflets or the intended book by Michaelis that no one seems to understand, it is an empty gesture. Their entire status as revolutionaries is embodied in Stevie’s disability, which responds to the cruel social order with nonsensical gestures that benefit neither Stevie nor the person or animal in pain.

Verloc and the Limits of Ability

This thwarted desire of Stevie to end suffering is not the only way his disability is defined in the book,
and thus it embodies more than simply the revolutionary inadequacy of the anarchists. Just as Stevie’s disability leads him to illogical reactions in response to cruelty, it also prevents him from being any real use to his material provider: Verloc. This inability to be of use to Verloc is a defining aspect of the boy’s disability, and nearly all his interactions with Verloc are examples of the boy’s inherent uselessness to his brother-in-law.

In the first paragraph of the first chapter Verloc’s relationship to Stevie is one of indifference because “his wife was in charge of his brother-in-law” (25), suggesting that from the very start of the book Stevie must be cared for. He is a dependent for Verloc. The first time Stevie’s name is mentioned is within Winnie’s consciousness, when the narrator states, “She had not been able to conceal from herself that he was a terrible encumbrance, that poor Stevie” (28). From the very outset then, Stevie is cast as a useless figure within the shop. Because he is constantly framed as a dependent and “poor Stevie,” it is assumed by all that this uselessness is due not to poverty or circumstance, but mental disability. When Stevie’s mother wonders about
the marriage of Winnie and Verloc, her question to her
daughter is “You don’t think, my dear, that Mr. Verloc is
getting tired of seeing Stevie about?” (51). Winnie’s
mother is described as “asking anxiously,” and the source
of this anxiety is not Verloc’s nature, but Stevie’s
disability as Verloc may understand it: his essential
uselessness. The reason Verloc would be tired of seeing
Stevie about, of course, is the boy has nothing to do and
no place to go.

Stevie’s relationship to Verloc is of the utmost
importance to everyone in the family except Verloc. Both
Winnie and her mother are aware of the annoyance that
Stevie creates in the home. When Verloc returns from
meeting with Vladimir, the two women “sat silent
themselves, keeping a watchful eye on poor Stevie, lest
he should break out into one of his fits of loquacity”
(51).⁷ This assumes, of course, that Stevie has
disrupted Verloc before, and that such disruptions could
potentially cause strife for the family. Such a
disturbance occurs during the meeting of the anarchists,

⁷ This loquacity is suggested to be nonsensical ramblings.
Nevertheless, the fear that Stevie may annoy Verloc with his
tries at communications mirrors Verloc’s annoyance with the
anarchists who do nothing but endlessly talk.
when Stevie literalizes Ossipon’s words about cannibalization. When the meeting closes Verloc has no idea what to do with Stevie, and it is clear that the boy, in the midst of his anxiety, could no longer be considered with indifference: “What on earth is he doing there? Mr. Verloc asked himself. What’s the meaning of these antics?...This appeared very queer to Mr. Verloc in view of the fact, borne upon him suddenly, that he had to provide for this fellow, too. He had never given a moment’s thought till then to that aspect of Stevie’s existence” (63). Embedded in this realization is that Stevie is useless. Verloc understands him as something that must be provided for. He ascends the stairs and tells his wife that Stevie is agitated, and this question of Verloc’s, that the boy is essentially a financial burden, is not missed by Winnie. Her response is an “anxiety that [Verloc] should believe Stevie to be a useful member of the family” (65). If Verloc recognizes that the boy is nothing but a burden, both Winnie and her mother must prove that he in some way can be useful, and not simply an economic parasite.

Stevie’s relationship to Verloc is predictably pitiful as it is defined by his desire to be useful to
his domestic master. He is described as “loyal” to Verloc with “a great and awed regard for his sister’s husband” (150). When there is a domestic chore to be done that he can physically do, Stevie is readily willing. When there is no promise of customers (and Verloc is not around), Stevie is put in charge of the shop. When Verloc enters the room and is described as “giving a slight kick to the gladstone bag on the floor,” Stevie “flung himself upon it, seized it, bore it off with triumphant devotion” (155). Only a page later, when Verloc removes his hat, “Stevie pounced upon it, and bore it off reverently into the kitchen” (156). Just as his mother and sister desire, so too does Stevie desire to be noticed as useful to the man that he considers his benefactor. Stevie has “devotion to Verloc (he was good)” (182). The small attempts at usefulness by Stevie, however, are never noticed by Verloc until Vladimir commands him to set off the bomb at Greenwich Observatory. To both of the above domestic attempts at doting by Stevie, Verloc is described as “surprised.” Only after Vladimir’s order (coupled with Winnie’s insistence that Stevie accompany Verloc on his walks) does Verloc see that the boy who needed to be provided
for could also be of some use. Stevie’s disability, however, explicitly creates the ultimate failure in his attempt at usefulness to Verloc.

Verloc never intended Stevie to die in his bomb-delivering errand, as evidenced from his own words and reaction upon discovering Stevie’s death, as well as the testimony of Inspector Heat. Verloc therefore attempted to make Stevie useful to him not as a sacrifice, but as a lackey. Mieke Bal writes of understanding a character’s function in the narrative, “the description which has been obtained of a character can be contrasted with an analysis of the functions it performs in a series of events...What kind of functions does a character perform, and what role does it play in the fabula? This confrontation can yield information about the construction of the story with respect to the fabula.”

The description of Stevie’s disability is a primary example of a function’s role, as its existence is what both furthers the story as well as the fabula. The bombing attempt does not fail because the Professor’s bomb goes haywire, nor is it due to any real negligence of instruction by Verloc. Instead, Stevie falls down due

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to clumsiness caused by his disability. Not only does this clumsiness destroy the attempted bombing, but it also leads to Verloc’s identification within the plot. In a book pervasive with cruel irony, it is no coincidence that Stevie’s clothes lead Inspector Heat to Verloc, so that even after death the boy is a burden to Verloc.

The importance of this discussion about Stevie’s uselessness toward Verloc, however, lies in the idea that Verloc’s new problem with Vladimir at the embassy is that Verloc has been deemed useless. Stevie embodies the inadequacies of the anarchists, and here his disability, established as a failure to be useful to Verloc, embodies the inadequacy of Verloc in his hopes to be relevant to Vladimir. When Verloc meets with Vladimir, the new ambassador is quick to tell Verloc that there is a new expectation to be met. Verloc is told, “What we want is activity—activity” (39). Verloc’s warnings about future bombings are no longer wanted; instead, it is bombings that are wanted, and anyone unable to provide them will

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9 It is perhaps worth a footnote here to bring back the point of mimesis in representation. Everyone trips. In The Secret Agent, however, no one ever trips besides the person who is physically compromised due to disability. The clumsiness at this moment is therefore created by the disability.
be deemed useless. When Verloc tries to show that he has been of some use thus far to the embassy, he explains how good his voice has been in avoiding disaster. Vladimir is quick to point out that a voice is only as good as it is useful, and “We have no use for a voice...As far as I can judge from your record kept here, you have done nothing to earn your money for the last three years” (41). In one fell swoop Vladimir defines Verloc’s work thus far as utterly inadequate, and worthy of dismissal if something does not change. Verloc, in the midst of trying to show he is of permanent use, expresses to Vladimir that a bombing attempt may expose him and “destroy my usefulness” (43). Again, Vladimir defines Verloc’s role in clear terms: “When you cease to be useful you shall cease to be employed” (43).10

It is clear from Vladimir’s language, as well as Verloc’s self-defense, that if Verloc feels the need to continue as agent provocateur, he must do something. This is the echo of the anxiety that Stevie causes for both Winnie and her mother, that Verloc may throw the boy...
out because he has ceased to become useful to him. Lest Stevie’s inadequacy and fated failure be disassociated from this conversation between Verloc and Vladimir, the language the two men use is penetrated by language used to describe Stevie. For instance, Vladimir states that as a secret agent Verloc “wouldn’t deceive an idiot” (38). In response, when Verloc is trying to defend his usefulness by stating he never bothered with Latin, he describes those with Latin as “Only a few hundred imbeciles who aren’t fit to take care of themselves” (40). This moment is similar to when both Vladimir and Verloc are distancing themselves from the ignorant middle classes who can be trusted for nothing, and Vladimir refers to them as “blinded by an idiotic vanity” (44). When Vladimir studies the physical appearance of Verloc, he consistently thinks of him as lazy, and a character of “incompetency” (42). And finally, when Vladimir explains the usefulness of the bombing plot on the observatory, he states the impact on the attack on science would be noted, believing “Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that” (46). And with little affection, the revolutionaries that Vladimir wants to stir in order to create a new political dynamic are “intellectual idiots”
who, rather than being described as speaking or writing, can only “howl” (46). The constant use of terms that could define intellectual inadequacy only accentuates the connection of Verloc’s desire to keep his job with Stevie’s idiocy. And of course, this desire in Verloc is destined to fail, much like Stevie’s desire to aid Verloc fails.

The Limits of Overcoming Distance

In the archetypal spy story, the crime-solving protagonist is allowed to reset the distance between characters, effectively ordering them in a spectrum of victims, heroes, and villains. Ellen Burton Harrington, in her discussion of The Secret Agent’s debt to detective fiction, points out that in Conrad’s work “there is no effective restoration of order; truth is not idealized in the novel.” The Secret Agent performs against expectations, as “the great spy, once designated so secretly on important documents, is revealed to be none other than the epitome of the comfortable, domestic patriarch” and “In place of the figure of the detective, Conrad places the tightly-wound figure of the Professor,
the wry, alienated anarchist who builds bombs and gives them away.”  

Without the stereotypical figures restoring order, a distance between characters is unresolved in the text. This distance, like the unmet desires of the anarchists and the uselessness of Verloc as a secret agent, is embodied in Stevie. Stevie’s inadequacy in connecting with any other character, as well as his physical inability to communicate his thoughts performs this irresolvable distance between all the characters of the novel.

Although Stevie cannot communicate his more complex thoughts, it does not mean—and the narrator gives us every indication otherwise—that Stevie does not have complex thoughts. In regards to explaining the incident with the fireworks to his sister, Stevie refrains, but for a specific reason: “his truly peculiar dumbness, which in the old affair of fireworks on the stairs had for many years resisted entreaties, coaxing, anger, and other means of investigation used by his beloved sister.

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For Stevie was loyal” (182). Stevie is able here, according to the narrator, to weigh conflicting loyalties (to his “beloved sister” and to Verloc), then make and sustain a strategy. Conrad has chosen here to make Stevie defined more by his inadequacies of communication than cognitive ability. Stevie does not have the ability to explain to his sister why he must remain silent, nor can he explain to Verloc his loyalty. The distance between Stevie’s ability to think and his ability to communicate is immense; he is, essentially, imprisoned from those around him by his disability.

The narrator constantly enters the consciousness of characters, and Stevie is no different. In the episode with the cabman beating the horse, the narrator states Stevie, though apt to forget mere facts, such as his name and address for instance, had a faithful memory of sensations. To be taken into a bed of compassion was the supreme remedy, with the only one disadvantage of being difficult of application on a large scale. And looking at the cabman, Stevie perceived this clearly, because he was reasonable. (145)
While there is no argument that Stevie, who forgets basic information and must rely on sensations to understand, is not intellectually normal, he is nevertheless described as “reasonable.” All he can express of this reasonableness, however, is the exclamations “Poor, poor,” which obviously do not reach the level of complexity of his consciousness as the narrator describes it.

In the same scene with the cabman’s horse, Stevie is described as “like the rest of mankind, perplexed by the mystery of the universe, he had moments of consoling trust in the organized powers of the earth” (148). It is difficult to know what the narrator wants us to make of this thought as it is so abstract that it could be nothing more than some primordial need that even animals may have. What is important, however, is Stevie’s attempt at communication right after: “‘Police,’ he suggested, confidently” (148). When his sister tells him that the police cannot fix the cruelty done to the horse, Stevie can only mumble “Not for that.” What follows is a complicated explication of Stevie’s understanding of the police and Mr. Verloc’s goodness, an explication that Stevie cannot possibly make on his own to anyone, let
alone his sister: “the desolation of his mother and sister shrunk from setting up a theory of goodness before the victim. It would have been too cruel. And it was even possible that Stevie would not have believed them” (151). It is not simply that the narrator is communicating basic thoughts in a complicated way; it is the thoughts themselves which are complex: through his reasoning Stevie sees goodness in Verloc, considering the possibility of being lied to, and then making a decision based on the evidence.

Besides what is created by Stevie’s inability to communicate with others, there is also a much more crass example of disability performing distance within the text: the final result of his body. If his disability causes his fall, then disability causes him to explode into a scattered pile of tiny bits. Heat reports to the Assistant Commissioner that Stevie’s parts must be shoveled, and it is only in discovering a small scrap of clothing that he is at all identifiable. In the most gross and physical terms, Stevie is distanced from what it means to even be human. Heat, inspecting the remains of Stevie, is compared to “an indigent customer bending over what may be called the by-products of a butcher’s
shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner” (88). When Heat describes the body to Verloc, he mixes Stevie’s body parts with inanimate objects: “Blown to small bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters—all mixed up together” (175). His final state is so distant from anything resembling a human that he receives no reverence or respect from the seemingly neutral Inspector Heat.

This distancing effect of Stevie is pervasive in the novel, as there is essentially no closeness between any of the characters. This lack of closeness is caused by the same inadequacy that causes Stevie’s distance from other characters: the inability to communicate sincere thoughts to others. In the narrator’s near-constant examination of the consciousness of characters, it is clear that, like Stevie, what is discussed in the open is a mere echo of what is thought. Communication has “become empty forms; all the people are imprisoned in their own obsessions.” Winnie’s mother, for example, decides to move out of the home to insure that Stevie can stay with Verloc. This is a rationale that is never stated to Winnie nor Verloc; Winnie, in fact, berates her

mother for not thinking about how much Stevie will miss her. The truth, that “Stevie must remain destitute and dependent,” is never communicated between mother and daughter (136). Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner behave in much the same way, stating one motivation while believing an entirely different one. Heat is intent on protecting Verloc, but it is never voluntarily communicated to the Assistant Commissioner that this is because Verloc is an informer. In the same way, the Assistant Commissioner does not allow Heat to go after Michaelis, but the motivation for this, that Michaelis is the Assistant Commissioner’s key to domestic bliss due to the ticket-of-leave apostle’s position with his Lady patroness, is not communicated. All this concealment in the characters creates an isolation, so that even the intimately associated exist within their own spheres, protected by their unwillingness to communicate real motivation to those who want or need to know. While Stevie may be willing to communicate with others, he is nevertheless biologically prevented from doing so, making disability the embodiment of others’ inability and unwillingness to cease isolating themselves.
The most striking distance between characters is in the relationship between Verloc and Winnie. Verloc, of course, hides the details of his status as agent provocateur, especially when those details include him bombing the Greenwich Observatory. Winnie hides just as much from her husband, most notably the reason for marrying him: the domestic protection of Stevie. After Winnie finds out Verloc is behind Stevie’s murder, the narrator states her inability to speak: “Mrs. Verloc had not sufficient command over her voice. She did not see any alternative between screaming and silence, and instinctively she chose the silence. Winnie Verloc was temperamentally a silent person…She thought without looking at Mr. Verloc: ‘This man took the boy away to murder him’” (202). The entire final scene between the married couple is one of isolation, as Verloc continually misunderstands the growing rage of Winnie with shocking degrees of self-absorption. Verloc’s total lack of awareness is described as rooted in his vanity: “had grown older, fatter, heavier, in the belief that he lacked no fascination for being loved for his own sake” (206). The irony is all too present, as during this rumination of being loved his wife is pondering his
murder of her brother, and the subsequent murder of Verloc himself. Verloc completely misunderstands Winnie’s grief due to “the moral insulation that has kept the Verlocs, in their descent into marital domesticity, strangers to each other.” He is so far removed from her that Winnie’s “leisurely” stabbing brings no reaction but “Don’t” from Verloc. Even in her attempt to end his life, it can be fairly assumed that Verloc never even understands why.

Perhaps two characters who could be considered the least isolated from one another are Stevie and Winnie. Childless, Winnie is clearly presented as the true mother figure to Stevie. From the very beginning of the text Winnie is described as having “found an object of quasi-maternal affection in her brother” (28). When Stevie draws his chaotic circles as a calming pastime, Winnie “glanced at him from time to time with maternal vigilance” (30). Of course throughout the text Winnie is Stevie’s caretaker, keeping him safe when he climbs down from a moving carriage and distancing him from Verloc when her husband is particularly stressed. We also know

that Winnie finds purpose in her care for Stevie, so that his care is a sign of her personal usefulness to Verloc (keeping the boy away from him and occupied), her mother (caring for him since she is physically incapable), and herself (providing the maternal affection).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the love Winnie has for Stevie, her brother’s death unhinges her not simply from her husband, but from her brother as well. Obviously, since he is dead there is a distinct distance between them, but the narrator makes a point to show an initial connection with Stevie during her grief. Winnie sits “in the place where poor Stevie usually established himself of an evening with paper and pencil for the pastime of drawing these coruscations of innumerable circles suggesting chaos and eternity” (195). She stares at a blank wall and, despite her complex thoughts, is unable to communicate with Verloc. Just before the murder, the connection with Stevie is pronounced: “As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian, and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step” (213). Upon murdering Verloc, however, this connection ceases: “Mrs. Verloc had
let go the knife, and her extraordinary resemblance to her late brother had faded, had become very ordinary now” (213). Once Winnie performs the rage that Stevie so often felt due to his extreme sympathy with those in pain, she ironically ceases to be connected to him. Once Winnie can do that which Stevie’s disability never allowed him to do (successfully perform her rage, rather than shrieking and setting off fireworks), her connection is broken.

After the murder, her connection with her brother severed, Winnie becomes increasingly frantic and distant from her own emotions, unable to conceive of that which she sees in front of her, instead envisioning only a symbol of death: “Mrs. Verloc, who always refrained from looking deep into things, was compelled to look into the very bottom of this thing. She saw there no haunting face...She saw there an object. That object was the gallows” (217). When Winnie meets Ossipon, her behavior continues to become more erratic so that her vengeance of her brother has completely isolated herself from who she previously was. She now shouts at Verloc’s dead body and spills a convoluted biography to Ossipon. She clings to Ossipon like he is the lost love finally come home.
Never, however, is she able to concentrate on anything but the idea of death: “The memory of the early romance with the young butcher survived, tenacious, like the image of a glimpsed ideal in that heart quailing before the fear of the gallows and full of revolt against death” (223). Her eventual death is described as an act of “madness or despair,” a fair description of a woman who, after the death of her brother, becomes isolated from everyone, including her previous maternal, domestic self.

Terry Eagleton, in his essay, “Form, Ideology, and The Secret Agent,” states how “the novel is unable to speak of its contradictions; it is, rather, precisely its contradictions which speak.”15 For these present purposes I have amended Eagleton’s statement slightly: it is inadequacies that the novel is unable to speak of, and instead are performed by the characters, and embodied in Stevie. Mental disability is not simply an ornamental symbol of degeneration, but a consistent expression of the very cause for the often cited grimness and pessimism of the novel. In the final chapter of the novel the Professor states to Ossipon that “the weak, the flabby,

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the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind” (243) are the masters of all. The Professor calls out for the extermination of these weak masters, therefore indirectly calling first for the destruction of people like Stevie. Perhaps unbeknownst to him, the Professor’s desire is expressed through what occurs in the novel. Verloc is eliminated, Ossipon has become the consummate capitalist, and Michaelis and Karl Yundt are left without even the convenience of pretending to be revolutionaries in a back room pornographic shop. Winnie, unhinged after her brother’s death, is also exterminated despite the fact that she seemingly expressed the desire in her that would make her strong. At the center of all these failures is the master Stevie with “the weak…and the slavish mind.” In The Secret Agent this master’s elimination is not, as the Professor suggests, the beginning of a new era; instead all that remains is death in the ruins of “perverse unreason.”
CHAPTER VII

NARCISSISM AND THE EXPRESSION OF LOVE IN CARSON MCCULLERS’S THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

If a reader focuses solely on the mimetic aspect of Spiros Antonopoulos, it is difficult to imagine what the critical response would be. He is clearly a grotesque figure completely devoid of empathy, but so is nearly everyone else in the novel.¹ Set just before World War II in Georgia, the novel revolves around a deaf-mute named John Singer, whose presence in the small town creates a magnetic quality to those suffering the most from loneliness. Antonopoulos is Singer’s best friend and roommate; also a deaf-mute, Antonopoulos is severely disabled and depends on Singer for caretaking and affection, though he seems either unaware or unconcerned about this dependency. The dependency, apathy, and childishness of Antonopoulos may be rooted in his disability, but disability is not the only reason such dependency, apathy, and childishness exist in the text.

¹ Problems with a mimetic focus on Spiros Antonopoulos, or even John Singer, are aggravated due to Carson McCullers’s lack of desire in reflecting a real-world referent. Biographer Virginia Spencer Carr states in The Lonely Hunter that when McCullers’s husband Reeves encouraged her to attend a convention for the deaf in Georgia, McCullers declined: “She had already written that part of the novel, she said, and wanted to keep true her own imagined image” (19).
The other characters that surround Antonopoulos’s friend John Singer—Mick, Biff, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland—all share the negative characteristics of Antonopoulos and are in no way mentally disabled. Nevertheless, although mental disability is not the sole reason for these negative characteristics, its representation embodies them. The obese Greek is the narcissism and self-absorption of the other characters’ made flesh. What Mick, Biff, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland seek in communication with Singer is a reification of what they desire to hear about themselves. Similarly, Antonopoulos’s disability demands this same deference to the ego, not just from Singer, but from any who would attempt to interact with him. If the disabled Antonopoulos becomes narcissism incarnated, however, he also creates selflessness. Despite the dependency on, and lack of sympathy with John Singer, he is nevertheless the latter’s beloved; in this position he is the unlikely cause of the novel’s greatest love. As source of Singer’s complete devotion, Antonopoulos is also the source of the novel’s only examples of altruism. So long as Antonopoulos lives, Singer provides a novel of isolation and alienation with unconditional affection and
altruism even for strangers. Once Antonopoulos exits the novel, however, all such selflessness disappears. Antonopoulos’s mental disability therefore provides McCullers’s work with its pure expression of the very problem that causes people to be lonely: narcissism. Because of that expression through his disability, however, Antonopoulos helps create the answer to that narcissism, which occurs through Singer’s uncompromising, baffling devotion for him. If love is only real when nothing is returned but the natural rewards of its devotion, then no one is better suited to embody the object of such affection than a mindless and cruel man, physically incapable of the smallest acts and mentally unaware of their expectation.

Loneliness and Narcissism

Because Antonopoulos’s embodiment of narcissism operates as a reflection of that same narcissism in others—as well his authoring selfless love is seemingly a refutation of these same others—it is important to begin with an overview of the four “satellite” characters that surround John Singer. Critics and general readers alike
come to the same conclusion about these four characters: although truly lonely and certainly in need of Singer, they do not seek him out because of any unselfish desire to befriend the deaf-mute. Instead, because of his patience and silence, he allows them to obsess about their own lives, anxieties, and fears. There is not a single moment in the novel when these four characters want something from Singer because they believe it may benefit the man. There is no question made to Singer about his own life. We learn about Singer’s life through the narrator; Singer learns about the lives of his friends through their incessant speaking about themselves.

Jake Blount is the first to “befriend” Singer. He meets the deaf-mute at Biff’s café when the former is on an extended drinking binge and wildly trying to address the patrons with his politics and philosophy. His desire to have someone hear him is so intense that he literally beats himself against a wall behind the café, and must be cared for by Biff and Singer. When he therefore finally finds an audience in Singer, it is irrelevant that Singer shows no interest in the topic of conversation. The others in the café have ignored him, and Singer becomes
the most welcoming person present: "Blount paid no attention to anyone in the place except the mute... ‘You’re [Singer] the only one in this town who catches what I mean,’ Blount said. ‘For two days now I been talking to you in my mind because I know you understand the things I want to mean.’"\(^2\) The convoluted idea of audience here is clear. At this point in the novel Jake is so oblivious to Singer that he doesn’t know the man is a deaf-mute. The narrator has made clear Singer has not been paying attention to Jake; he can only understand him when he is directly looking at him. Yet Jake states he has been talking to Singer in his mind for two days. He has so internalized the conversation that Singer’s identity is irrelevant. To Jake, this man who does not laugh at him is the same as a man who believes him, who wants to hear what he has to say. The reason for this creation of Singer as what Jake needs to be is clear: Jake is crippled with loneliness. The narrator states when Jake is alone, “He sat on the edge of the unmade bed and gnawed savagely at the broken, dirty ends of his

\(^2\) Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (New York: Mariner, 2004), 23. All further references to this edition are given in the text.
The loneliness in him was so keen that he was filled with terror” (153). To be around Singer, however, provides him with some kind of company. He gets no responses from Singer besides the occasional shrug of the shoulders, but he doesn’t need even that. Singer takes care of Jake when he has no place to go, and offers his apartment as a place for Jake to come and rest. When Jake is allowed to speak, the effect is also clear: “[Jake] would talk, and the words created themselves from the dark morning spent in the streets or in his room alone. The words were formed and spoken with relief” (155).

Mick’s motivations in befriending Singer are similar. Of the four characters that orbit John Singer, Mick, if for no other reason than simply counting the pages dedicated to her character, is the most important. She is autobiographical in many ways, echoing McCullers’s own desires to become a concert pianist and her alienation through puberty. Her loneliness is perhaps the most intense in the novel as it is the most clearly involuntary. Still an adolescent, Mick can only dream of the physical escape that Jake, Copeland, and Biff could theoretically arrange. Home is a place of annoyance with
siblings, misunderstanding with parents, and eventual anxiety over financial security. Her only escape is a psychological one, into her “inside room,” where only Singer and the classical music she loves share space with her. Mick often fantasizing about Singer, imagining once that “they would be skating together and then Mister Singer would fall through the ice and she would dive in without regard for peril and swim under the ice and save his life” (98). At other times she fantasizes about running away with him: “she planned about how she was an orphan and lived with Mister Singer—just the two of them in a foreign house where in the winter it would snow. Maybe in a little Switzerland town” (243). She even goes so far as to imagine Singer like God, since both are silent, and despite her avowed atheism quotes Christ on the cross forgiving his crucifiers, obscuring whether she is imagining herself speaking to God or Singer.

Mick’s devotion to Singer ostensibly seems less unselfish than Jake Blount’s, and perhaps it is. She does, after all, dream of saving Singer and wants to run away with him. To Mick, however, Singer is always associated with music, which proves to be like a drug that removes her from her loneliness. After first
encountering the effect of music, she cannot bear to have it gone: “The music left only this bad hurt in her, and a blankness...Now that it was over there was only her heart like a rabbit and this terrible hurt” (119). Just as Jake Blount beats himself in frustration over not being able to express his thoughts to anyone, Mick upon hearing the music “began hitting her thigh with her fists. She pounded the same muscle with all her strength until the tears came down her face. But she could not feel this hard enough” (119). To experience this end of loneliness in music, and then have it taken away, is unbearable. And what music does for Mick, so too does Singer. The narrator states, “The fellow Motsart’s [sic] music was in her mind again. It was funny, but Mister Singer reminded her of this music” (53). The two most important parts of her life are made clear: “In the morning the first thing she would think of was [Singer]. Along with music” (243). When she is permanently separated from Singer by his death, her connection to the music dissolves as well. Important in this connection of music to Singer is that their importance is related to what they do for Mick. Her loneliness is intense, and the alleviation of this loneliness is her strongest desire: “I want—I want—I
want—was all that she could think about—but just what this real want was she did not know” (52). What this desire is, however, is clear to the reader, as it is expressed in the following paragraph. She wants to end her loneliness, and this can only be done through her classical music and association with Singer: “Mick waited, and after a while he came out into the hall again. She hoped he would look down and smile at her. And then when he got to his door he did glance down and nod his head. Mick’s grin was wide and trembling” (53). She eventually wants to be inside Singer’s room, because this was the only “good private place where she could go and be by herself” (53). Singer’s very presence in his own room is obscured so that he becomes unnecessary. All that matters is what Singer offers to Mick’s loneliness.

Copeland’s desire to be with Singer is, like the previous two, rooted in his desire to end his loneliness. For Copeland, to end loneliness has little to do with being around those who care for him. His daughter Portia makes several efforts to be friendly with her father, and each time the conversation devolves into Copeland’s irritation with his children’s lives. Despite naming Portia from Shakespeare, and his sons Hamilton and Karl
Marx after political heroes, his children are not a part of “the talented tenth.” This is not simply the case of a professional father disgruntled at his adult children living in relative poverty and duress, but that his children are failing Copeland’s political and ethical standards. Copeland echoes the positive eugenics of DuBois and other black leaders of the early 20\(^{th}\) century: “It is not more children we need but more chances for the ones already on the earth. Eugenic Parenthood for the Negro Race was what he would exhort them to. He would tell them in simple words, always the same way, and with the years it came to be a sort of angry poem which head had always known by heart” (74). Copeland rejects his entire family, including his in-laws, and not the other way around. Even after having physically assaulted his now-deceased wife, his in-laws are still willing to endure his political speeches, even if they comically confuse Karl Marx with the evangelist Mark. It is Copeland who rejects those who fail in political and ethical purity; only Singer is able to pass the test. Copeland understands Singer to be different from not only all white people, but everyone he knows, white or black. With Singer, the angry, perpetually discontented Copeland
finds something he can find nowhere else: “Doctor Copeland held his head in his hands and from his throat there came the strange sound like a kind of singing moan. He remembered [Singer’s] face when he smiled behind the yellow match flame on that rainy night—and peace was in him” (90). Later in the novel, the narrator makes clear the dichotomy between the effects of his medical practice—that is, working with the uneducated blacks who are not living up to his oft-repeated mantra, “the strong true purpose”—and seeing Singer: “He lay tense and wakeful through the night. Then the next day was Sunday. He made half a dozen calls, and in the middle of the morning he went to Mr. Singer’s room. The visit blunted the feeling of loneliness in him so that when he said good-bye he was at peace with himself once more” (148). Important here is that Copeland’s benefit to visiting Singer is to be at peace with himself. This is because he can state his views openly to Singer whose own life, unlike his own family, does not refute him. With Singer, Copeland can espouse his eugenics: “Only the hardy Negroes with will could live. Beaten and chained and sold on the black, the least of these strong ones perished again. And finally through the bitter years the
strongest of my people are still here” (140). It doesn’t matter that Singer has no response for Copeland, or that he is implicitly lying since he in no way actually believes “the strongest of my people are still here.” Much like Jake, Copeland needs an audience for his beliefs to be stated, and therefore his loneliness to be alleviated.

Of the four who visit Singer, Biff’s connection with the deaf-mute is the most tenuous. Unlike the others it is not entirely clear why Biff visits Singer. Biff is certainly as lonely as the others, and was so even before his wife Alice passed away suddenly, but he doesn’t come to talk with Singer. In fact, he is not entirely comfortable with the man, and with the attraction others have for him: “The reason—was it in them or in him? [Singer] sat very still with his hands in his pockets, and because he did not speak it made him seem superior. What did that fellow think and realize? What did he know...The puzzle had taken root in him. It worried him in the back of his mind and left him uneasy. There was something wrong” (134). We do know, however, how Singer understands Biff’s attraction to him. In a letter to Antonopoulos, Singer writes, “[Biff] is not just like the
others...He watches” (215). What we do know about Biff is that he wishes to have an opportunity to display his maternal instinct. To both his niece, as well as the distant Mick, Biff wants to watch over them like a mother: “he even proved it himself—the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby were his kids” (133). We also know that Biff likes to observe and ask questions, and at times these questions make him more insightful than others. When Singer leaves to visit Antonopoulos, all his “satellites” become anxious, but the narrator only records Biff as actually wondering where Singer went: “Why, for instance, did Singer go away on the train and, when he was asked where he had been, pretend that he did not understand the question? And why did everyone persist in thinking the mute was exactly as they wanted him to be—when most likely it was all a very queer mistake?” (224). These are all insightful questions from Biff, but what is important to the reading is the lack of motivation to answer them. Just as Jake criticizes Biff for safely remaining behind a register all the day, so he safely puzzles over Singer’s presence, but neither out of friendship nor a desire to satiate curiosity does he
attempt to understand Singer. Biff enjoys the metaphorical position of standing behind the cash register where he can idly ask questions and fantasize, and Singer gives him the material to occupy himself with.

Certainly, the above question by Biff reminds us that these four, although the narrative concentrates on their attempts to find peace with themselves, are not the only ones in the town to believe John Singer in some way embodies an answer. Early in the novel the narrator states, “People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. His eyes made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before. He did not seem quite human” (25). Everyone has the ability to read meaning into Singer. When he is perceived by others, the narrator takes on the perspective of the one who is gazing. Singer is always the object of the gaze, and is therefore always interpreted as the voyeur sees fit. He is “always glad to stop with anyone wishing his company,” and therefore becomes the hero that each person needs him to be: “The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he had received a large legacy and
was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C.I.O. A lone Turk...claimed passionately to his wife that the mute was Turkish” (200). If the four who encircle Singer in the narrative are self-seeking in their desire to be with the deaf-mute, their actions reflect the behavior of the entire town.

While loneliness may explain each of the four’s desire to be near Singer, this desire must nevertheless be understood as a narcissistic one. They seek something for themselves in this arrangement. There is never a question in their hearts, which due to privilege of the narrator the reader would be aware of, about what Singer needs; it is always what Singer provides. The deaf-mute recognizes this himself. When he writes to Antonopoulos, he states, “The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company. That is why they are always so busy” (215). Singer is not naïve to their selfish desires. How could he be, when he has spent his adult life with Antonopoulos, the man who embodies through his mental disability these narcissistic desires. Antonopoulos’s presence in his friend’s life echoes the
endless need for what others require of Singer, made all
the more radical through the grotesqueness of
Antonopoulos’s character due to his disability.

Embodiment and Mental Disability

Antonopoulos’s mental disability is immediately made
clear to the reader by his contrast with Singer. Even in
the first paragraph of the novel, the two men are
separated by their intellect: “[Antonopoulos’s] face was
round and oily, with half-closed eye-lids that curved in
a gentle, stupid smile. The other mute was tall. His
eyes had a quick, intelligent expression” (3). Because
Singer is established early as an intelligent man,
Antonopoulos’s mental disability makes his physical
disability (he too is a deaf-mute) of less thematic
importance. His inability to communicate and empathize
with one who loves him as much as Singer is not due to
his physical disability, as Singer, sharing the same
physical disability, attempts to communicate and
empathize with him constantly. What prevents him from communicating is his mental disability. It defines the relationship of Singer and Antonopoulos, as the former is constantly deferring, speaking, and adjusting to the latter due to the mental disability.

When Singer and Antonopoulos live together, the latter is described as “very fretful, and kept finding fault with the fruit drinks and food that Singer prepared for him” (7). He is “irritable” and “lazy.” After he has what we assume to be a digestive (and not neurological) illness, he begins to steal unimportant items from restaurants such as lumps of sugar, silverware, or pepper shakers. When Singer finds out about such acts and scolds him, Antonopoulos is unmoved and shows only a “bland smile.” Eventually he is jailed for the petty thievery, but the time in prison has no effect on him. In fact, he is described as not wanting to leave the cell since the jail offers him all the carnal delights and conveniences that he wants. Of course, Singer has doted on his friend prior to the stealing, so there can be no motivation in Antonopoulos

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3 Later in the novel the reader finds out that Singer likes to be around other deaf people who sign, but Antonopoulos would refuse to go to the conventions where a deaf community gathered together.
that he prefers the jail cell because Singer deprives things from him. Singer offers Antonopoulos friendship and caregiving, but because nothing is required of Antonopoulos in the jail cell it is the preferable location. When, against all of Singer’s wishes, Antonopoulos’s cousin puts him in an institution, the Greek is in no way disturbed like Singer. His every wish is fulfilled in the institution whether he is healthy or sick. When Singer visits him the only way he can make his friend act properly is by baiting him with alcohol.\(^4\) This seemingly parasitic relationship between Singer and Antonopoulos is emphasized through the mythical structure of the Antonopoulos chapters, where Singer’s devotion to his friend is cast in archetype rather than psychological realism, as is the case in other parts of the novel.

Joseph Millichap writes of the opening of the novel, when Singer and Antonopoulos’s relationship is introduced:

“this opening section creates an aura of the timeless world of the imagination, the soul, the interior self. The world of the mutes remains separate from the town

\(^4\) Antonopoulos’s love for alcohol that previously kept Singer from befriending another deaf man in the town. When Singer invites the man to his and Antonopoulos’s home, the Greek drinks an entire bottle of liquor, accuses the man of stealing it, and drives him away in anger. There is no regret in Antonopoulos, and in Singer no lasting resentment toward his friend.
which surrounds them, for it is in actuality the changeless realm of the human heart.”

Part of the changelessness to Antonopoulos is his mental disability, which makes him a child, though without the Romantic illusion of innocence or purity. Instead, he is a child in his total disregard of others and concentration on meeting his own needs. Therefore when Singer comes to visit him in the institution, Antonopoulos only becomes excited when his friend offers him a gift; his presence, though recognized by the Greek, is meaningless. Singer’s presence as caretaker is not necessary in the institution, so only when Singer takes him to dinner, baits him with alcohol, or brings him a movie projector is Antonopoulos excited. Even when gifts are brought but they don’t meet his approval, he is without gratitude: “When he saw that nothing good to eat had been concealed there, he dumped the gifts disdainfully on his bed and did not bother with them any more” (92-3). When he does not get his way, he simply pouts or becomes angry. The narrator describes the

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childishness of Antonopoulos when Singer tries to teach his friend to play chess:

At first [Antonopoulos] could not be interested in the reasons for moving the various pieces about on the board. Then Singer began to keep a bottle of something good under the table to be taken out after each lesson. The Greek never got on to the erratic movements of the knights and the sweeping mobility of the queens, but he learned to make a few set, opening moves. He preferred the white pieces and would not play if the black men were given him. After the first moves Singer worked out the game by himself while his friend looked on drowsily. If Singer made brilliant attacks on his own men so that in the end the black king was killed, Antonopoulos was always very proud and pleased. (5)

If Antonopoulos’s inability to understand chess is due to his mental disability, so too is the necessity of baiting the Greek into attentive behavior, followed by unearned pride (with the suggestion that if Singer “killed” Antonopoulos’s king, the latter would protest). Much as
Singer’s “satellites” do not seem to care for his well-being, Antonopoulos is oblivious to Singer’s needs. This obliviousness is not an incidental characteristic, unrelated to his mental disability. Antonopoulos’s two character dimensions in the novel are his mental disability and extreme selfishness. As readers we connect these two so that the insular world of mental disability, with its inherent diminished capacity for language and communication, becomes the site of his boorish behavior.

It is no coincidence, of course, that Antonopoulos’s disability makes him like a child, and completely self-absorbed. In “On Narcissism,” Freud describes the narcissism to be a condition of childhood: “Observation of normal adults shows that their former megalomania has been damped down and that the psychical characteristics from which we inferred their infantile narcissism have been effaced.” To Freud, the normal adult does not function in this way, instead “project[ing] before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of
his childhood in which he was his own ideal.”⁶ Therefore the ego ideal substitutes for the narcissistic ego of a child which worships itself. The ego ideal holds this worshipping in check through the agency of the conscience. Therefore, the “same impressions, experiences, impulses and desires that one man indulges or at least works over consciously will be rejected with the utmost indignation.”⁷ This, of course, never occurs with Antonopoulos. He is incapable of rejecting any indulgence, thus his behavior leads to stealing, obesity, general belligerence or listlessness in matters that do not directly concern him. For Freud the ego ideal is partly created due to the presence of parents. In The Heart is a Lonely Hunter each character’s past is described to the reader in some degree, even the mysterious Singer. Antonopoulos, however, has only a cousin, and textually no back story nor parental lineage. Therefore Antonopoulos embodies the narcissistic behavior of those who desire to be near Singer. Due to his disability he is incapable of constructing any kind of


⁷ Part of the reason for this concentration on Freud’s understanding of narcissism is that McCullers herself was well read in Freud, as is discussed in Virginia Spencer Carr’s biography The Lonely Hunter.
ideal ego. Here complete selfishness is embodied as the mentally disabled mind. This embodiment becomes more overt as Antonopoulos grows more grotesquely obese as the novel progresses. Much of Antonopoulos’s belligerence comes after an illness that is seemingly related to his stomach. When he falls ill, “He sat up in bed with hands on his fat stomach and big, oily tears rolled down his cheeks” (6). He becomes a literal consumer of everything to his own benefit or detriment. When Singer first visits him in the institution, Antonopoulos is described as “fatter than before” (92). In much the same way that there is no evidence that Singer understands what Jake Blount or Dr. Copeland is saying to him, we as readers have long been shown there is no way that Antonopoulos understands Singer due to his mental disability. He is therefore like a black hole of communication, understanding only that which can feed his own ego or body; in other words, the pleasure to his body (food and liquor) or to his mind (as when he makes sure the others in the ward know the movie projector is his). Of course, because of his mental disability, we are not even sure that Antonopoulos is aware of his behavior. He is not the case of a man who acts narcissistically and is
perhaps guilty later, or at least aware of how he feeds off others. Antonopoulos, as a severely disabled man, prevents the reader from creating any assumption of self-awareness of his narcissism. In this way he is not only the child, but the infant: not just narcissistic, but unaware of any standard of behavior other than what he performs.

Singer and the Response to Narcissism

If this is all there is to the symbolic emotional centerpiece of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, then not only does the emotional status of the four who surround Singer become embodied in a grotesque human being, then so too is the emotional status of Singer himself. If Antonopoulos is only as a character the symbolic embodiment of narcissism, then Singer is the most deluded character in the novel. Much like the others “felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that,” so too Singer believes incorrectly that Antonopoulos understands him when he is madly signing to his friend about his life back home. Even Singer apparently has his limits of
suspending disbelief, however, as he writes letters to an illiterate disabled man, only to destroy them later. He may therefore be more aware than the others of his fetishization of the relationship with a man he is not really communicating with, but he nevertheless refuses to change.

While Antonopoulos as a mentally disabled man embodies the Freudian concept of narcissism, I do not believe like other critics that Singer’s relationship to this man is the same as others’ relationship to him. Antonopoulos is both the embodiment of the ego, but selfless devotion to him also makes the Greek the ultimate source of unselfishness and altruism in the novel. His position of idiot-beloved exists within the same body of his position of idiot-narcissist. Critics who would see Singer the same as others often point to the moment when he sees himself in Antonopoulos’s eyes: “The eyes of his friend were moist and dark, and in them he saw the little rectangled pictures of himself that he had watched a thousand times” (220). Rather than see this as symbolic of Singer transplanting his version of Antonopoulos onto the man, much as others do to Singer, this moment is true, selfless devotion between the lover
and the beloved. Immediately after this seeing himself in Antonopoulos’s eyes—which is really seeing back to a happier time in his life, thus the narrator states it returns Singer to a moment “he had watched a thousand times”—the most expressive interaction between the two men occurs. They both laugh, and Antonopoulos reaches out and playfully touches Singer by poking him in the stomach. It lasts only a moment, but here Antonopoulos reaches out to his friend. This reaching out excites Singer to the point that he cannot control himself; unlike the others who orbit Singer, the latter is thrilled when his conversational partner reaches out to him: “Singer continued to laugh riotously until his breath was gone and his fingers trembled. He grasped the arm of his friend and tried to steady himself.” Rather than turning Singer into another deluded narcissist, it shows him to be a devoted companion, and representative of the other moments in the text where the love Singer has for Antonopoulos, despite the latter’s narcissism, is able to express itself not just through selflessness toward the beloved but, distinct from all other relationships in the text, toward others as well.
Readers recognize that Singer is not like others in the novel. Even at the level of narration, Singer is distinct. When chapters revolve around the four characters that surround Singer, the narrator uses transposed speech to express the characters’ thoughts, creating an intimacy with these characters. When Singer is the subject of the narration, however, there is greater distance. This may be due to the fact that the reader is never really sure how Singer “sounds” outside of his own letter to Antonopoulos, but nevertheless the effect is the same: Singer is separated from the other four characters. We are still privy to his thoughts when the narrator sees fit, but the language is more neutral than when the narrator adopts the speech patterns of the other four, as when in the Mick chapters Mozart is spelled incorrectly in order to echo Mick’s knowledge, or in the Copeland chapters when “strong true purpose” as a phrase is echoed from Copeland’s speeches. Of course, the other characters in the novel obsessing over Singer’s abnormal life also distances him from other characters, but this does not lead Singer into a solitary life: “It is his compassion—his interest in his fellows—that radiates from him. Accosted by strangers on the street,
Singer cannot save his world, but he refuses to ignore it."

Not to be ignored, however, is that Singer does on some level enjoy the company of the others due to the alleviation of his own loneliness. He signs to Antonopoulos during his first visit to the institution that "he liked to have them come" (93). Later, the narrator states, "And invariably he met them at the door with a cordial smile. The want for Antonopoulos was always with him—just as it had been the first months after his friend had gone—and it was better to be with any person than to be too long alone" (205). It is perfectly clear then, that Singer is using these four people as a kind of place-holder until he is able to see the beloved Antonopoulos again. What makes this different, however, must first be traced to the level of devotion Singer has for his friend. It is from this intense level of devotion, a kind of love the book has no double for, that makes Singer unique, and therefore alters Antonopoulos from idiot-narcissist to idiot-beloved.

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Singer constantly puts Antonopoulos ahead of himself, something no character is willing to do for another, whether Singer or their respective wives, siblings, or friends. McCullers herself writes, in an original outline for the novel, “Singer is the only person who could attribute to Antonopoulos dignity and a certain wisdom...No part of Singer is left untouched by this love.” This ability of Singer to create wisdom and dignity in is emphasized through Antonopoulos’s mental disability. The Greek cannot take care of himself, and it is therefore up to Singer to shelter and feed his friend. Antonopoulos’s only family in the novel is his cousin Charlie Parker. While Parker does give Antonopoulos a menial job in his sweet shop, he nevertheless has only a negative impact on his cousin: despite the fact that Singer cares for him, Charlie Parker is the one who has the demand and the right to see Antonopoulos institutionalized. It is Singer who speaks up for the Greek’s autonomy, only to see his appeals to Parker go to waste. Once Antonopoulos is institutionalized, however, Singer’s devotion to his

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friend’s well-being remains the same. Singer saves his money and vacation time so he can visit Antonopoulos, and great amounts of energy are put into fantasizing how wonderful the trip would be: “For months he had planned this trip and imagined about each moment they would have together” (92). When Singer is unable to find Antonopoulos on his second trip to the institution he is frantic, expressing more concern for another person than at any other moment in the novel. Singer brings gifts for his friend at each visit, despite the lack of appreciation of these gifts; no one who visits Singer brings him anything but their own problems. In fact, Singer supplies his own visitors with gifts as well.

When Singer write to Antonopoulos, he echoes the deep need for companionship that his visitors necessarily suggest. Like others, loneliness is a terrible burden for him to bear as he writes his friend, “The only thing I can imagine is when I will be with you again. If I cannot come to you soon I do not know what...The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear...I am not meant to be alone and without you who understand” (216, 217).\(^{10}\) Also,\(^{10}\) This leads some critics to see Singer and Antonopoulos’s relationship as a homosexual one. Gayatri Spivak states of the
there is an echo of these visitors in the near-religious devotion Singer has toward his friend, much like Mick invokes the words of Christ after thinking about Singer. Singer dreams, "Antonopolous kneeled at the top of these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at it as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps...Behind [Singer] on the ground he felt the one with the mustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind them there were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. (217)

Once Antonopolous disappears in the dream and the staircase falls, Singer "felt himself fall downward. He
awoke with a jerk. The early light whitened the window. He felt afraid." The religious language in Singer’s relationship to Antonopoulous continues in his waking life as well. After Singer and Antonopoulous have their closest moment of affection, the latter “inclined his head so deliberately that the gesture seemed one of benediction rather than a simple nod of thanks” (221). Though there is similar religious rhetoric in the others (especially Mick) for Singer, Jan Whitt states, “by making Singer divine, the townspeople depersonalize, and in effect, murder him,” since his divinity is not based on who he is but what the others project. The religious rhetoric of Singer toward Antonopoulous, however, leads to sacrifice toward his friend. If Singer is a disciple, he is one willing to die for his master’s life; if the others are disciples of Singer, they are interested in what their master’s life offers them. The intensity of this devotion by the disciple Singer is therefore highlighted through Antonopoulous’s

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12 Virginia Spencer Carr writes that one of Biff’s dramas is that “imaginary children think of him as ‘Our Father’ and come to him with questions that they are sure he can answer” (24). This expression of a desire to be in a protective role occurs because Biff wants something for himself. Rather than actually protect, he wants to be seen as a protector.
disability, since this disability allows for the expression of the unselfishness that characterizes Singer’s love. Antonopoulos’s character offers nothing in return for Singer, and yet the latter constantly gives of himself. If Antonopoulos willingly engages in communication with Singer, then Singer’s steadfastness in the face of rejection and humiliation is minimized. Yet as the novel progresses and Singer’s devotion only grows, Antonopoulos’s mental disability becomes a more overt foil for his friend’s love. His carnal desires dominate him so that he grows more and more expansive with each visit, which is to say more and more stationary and unresponsive. Yet Singer’s devotion in this face of this unresponsiveness is undaunted. On his last trip to see his friend, who unbeknownst to Singer has passed, the narrator states, “Sometimes he thought of Antonopoulos with awe and self-abasement, sometimes with pride—always with love unchecked by criticism, freed of will...in his waking thoughts they were eternally united” (322).

Not only does Antonopoulos’s unresponsiveness create an unselfishness in Singer’s relationship to his beloved, but creates an unselfishness toward others as well. Using Levinas to understand the relationships of the
novel, Charles Bradshaw states, “Although Singer has no social agenda and does not struggle with oppressed artistic tendencies, his love and concern for his friend results in a totalizing relationship where Antonopoulos becomes a part of Singer’s Self.” Such a conclusion, however, must ignore all the ways that Singer’s devotion to Antonopoulos results in the selfless behavior he displays toward others, something that does not occur in others’ “totalizing relationship” toward Singer. Mick’s relationship to Singer, for instance, in no way has a ripple effect that creates greater affection or devotion for her own family. Her attempts at creating an intimacy with Bubber and other members of her family fail, as when she attempts to speak with her father. She recognizes as much after spending time with him: “Now she just suddenly knew that she knew about her Dad. He was lonesome and he was an old man. Because none of the kids went to him for anything” (101). Yet after experiencing this knowledge she experiences “a queer

14 Mick does at least regret lying to Bubber about his supposed murdering of Baby, Biff’s niece. Nevertheless, this moment comes long after she has recognized her need for Singer. This suggests that even with Singer in her life she was unable to stop herself from tormenting her brother simply for the satisfaction of it.
feeling,” and eventually “couldn’t tell him about the things in her mind.” Mick’s devotion to Singer does not engender selflessness as Singer’s devotion to Antonopoulos does. When Bubber goes missing, Singer volunteers himself in the search despite the fact that he knows little of what has happened. At the moment when Mick is most cruel to her sibling, Singer is the most selfless.

The same lack of positive effect appears in how Jake and Copeland relate to others after beginning their relationships with Singer. Singer’s selflessness toward Jake allows the transient to exist outside of jail; it is Singer who takes him in after the police bring him to Biff’s café. Nevertheless Jake does not overcome his desire for anarchy. Never reaching out to another person except for hopes of political affinity, he rejects the preacher who writes the like-minded messages on the street. Once Jake knows the preacher thinks differently—despite the fact that Singer thinks differently from Jake—he rejects him. Like Jake, Copeland strikes out violently rather than assist any of those around him in need. Copeland never offers a consistent olive branch to his family despite their sincere attempts and his attempt
to avenge Willie’s injustice expresses itself in a rage. At the same time, Singer travels on medical rounds with Copeland and helps him with a deaf-mute patient. Copeland invites Singer to the Christmas party because Singer has given his own money for Copeland’s “strong true purpose.” This unselfishness by Singer does not ripple into unselfishness in Copeland’s life. If Antonopoulos’s disability emphasizes the unselfishness in Singer’s devotion toward him, then the lack of reflected unselfishness in those with devotion to Singer emphasizes the deaf-mute’s singularity.

Antonopoulos’s death, however, leaves Singer without an object of devotion. Lest it be assumed that Singer is a generally decent person and his unselfishness unrelated to Antonopoulos, we see Singer immediately degenerate into incoherent thieving upon finding out about his friend’s death: “in addition to the articles he had brought with him he carried away three towels, two cakes of soap, a pen and a bottle of ink, a roll of toilet paper, and a Holy Bible” (324). As though trying to recreate Antonopoulos’s own thieving and thus have his friend with him again, Singer mindlessly steals things he assumedly already has or simply does not need. Earlier
in the novel Singer expressed to Antonopoulos the joy of speaking with other deaf people, even if the Greek himself did not care for it. When the opportunity arises after Antonopoulos’s death, and these new friends reach out to Singer, the previous version of the deaf-mute is gone. Without Antonopoulos, Singer no longer wishes to reach out to a community as he did before. Instead, he simply internalizes:

He told his own name and the name of the town where he lived. After that he could think of nothing else to tell about himself. He asked if they knew Spiros Antonopoulos. They did not know him. Singer stood with his hands dangling loose. He was so listless and cold that the three mutes in the bowler hats looked at him queerly. After a while they left him out of their conversation. And when they had paid for the rounds of beers and were ready to depart they did not suggest that he join them. (325)

Through understanding how love and unselfishness work in the novel, we can connect the lack of these positive attributes with the lack of Antonopoulos. Although as a figure he is the embodiment of narcissism, Singer is
devoted to him nonetheless. Without this beloved figure in his life, Singer is not capable of the selflessness he earlier showed to those he encountered.

Upon Antonopoulous’s death, Singer commits arguably the most selfish act: suicide. His own disciples do not follow with their own suicide, however, but with the crushing of their dreams. Mick gives up music and takes a monotonous job at the five and dime. Jake starts over again as a transient having finally given himself to a mindless rage in a fight. Copeland gives up on the “strong true purpose” and is literally sent out to pasture on the family’s rural farm, surrounded by people he will be able to tolerate only through aloofness and isolation. Biff, connected still to the café, steadies himself to endure another day of desiring what he will never have. While Singer is their most direct connection, they are all inevitably tied to the presence of Antonopoulous, who through his status as beloved indirectly gives them an audience in Singer who allows them to briefly believe they could realize their desires.

If loneliness orchestrates all the characters in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, then Antonopoulous stands in the center, not because he is the most lonely but because he
embodies the cause of that loneliness. His mental
disability allows him to embody narcissism without
himself being lonely, creating him to be an ironic
grotesque which other characters can track their own
problems to, despite the fact that they are unaware of
his existence. This complete narcissism in Antonopoulos,
however, does not deter Singer in any way from a
completely selfless devotion, and because of that
devotion, Singer displays compassion for others. Just as
Antonopoulos’s disability allows him to embody the inward
aspect of loneliness, the totality of that embodiment
also allows him to express the necessary selflessness
that love and compassion must have. His disability makes
him useless and narcissistic, but that is precisely what
makes Singer able to be compassionate toward others:
there is nothing Antonopoulos can offer him other than
the reward of giving of the self to the other. In his
biography of McCullers, Oliver Evans writes, “But the
fact that love, whether it be for a person or an ideal,
is seldom completely or permanently successful does not
mean that it is not valuable while it lasts. Its value,
however, is chiefly to the lover in that it affords him
release, however partial and temporary, from his cell, so
that for the time that he loves he is happy, as was Singer."^{15} Precisely because Antonopoulos is a grotesque blob of infantile behavior can Singer receive that release; if Antonopoulos offers him something, like Singer offers his four "satellite" friends, then love and its deterrent, narcissism, cannot be expressed through his representation.

CHAPTER VIII

MENTAL DISABILITY AS CATALYST FOR MORAL PERFORMANCE IN THE SOUND AND THE FURY

The previous two chapters discussed mental disability as the metaphorical embodiment of specific dimensions of other characters in each respective novel. Not surprisingly, these dimensions of character are defined by their deficiency: narcissism in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and inadequacy (in all its forms) in The Secret Agent. Some of mental disability’s most archetypal characteristics—a lack of communicative ability, a state of dependence, childishness, and a stereotypical apathy or listlessness—all suggest an isolated life, and therefore are readily associated with characters such as Verloc and Jake Blount who not only distance themselves with their own self-absorption, but are entirely unaware of their behavior. In these final two chapters embodiment is still central to the representation of the mentally disabled, but rather than embodying abstract parts of the text’s aesthetics, Benjy Compson of The Sound and the Fury and Leda Helianos from Glenway Wescott’s Apartment in Athens operate as
catalytic forces in their respective narratives. The presence of mental disability forces those around them to respond with their own individual expressions of priority and ethics. This certainly does not suggest that in other texts there are characters who do not respond to the mental disabled near to them. Instead, these final two chapters are examples of the emphasis in representation of characters who exist without ideology themselves, and work to facilitate the expression of ideology in others. Still seen as diminished (if not empty) vessels of humanity, their mental deficit acts as a kind of bait for other characters; in their interaction with the mentally disabled, pretensions and masquerades cease to function.

Within all of American literature Benjy Compson is one of the more complex and dense narrators, and that position in the discourse certainly makes him unique from the other characters in this study. Despite the difficulty in reading Benjy’s narration, his voice is the first the reader encounters in The Sound and the Fury. He creates the original picture of Caddy and the Compson family, giving his representation of his sister a primacy over his brothers’ depictions. Faulkner himself stated,
“I wrote the Benjy part first. That wasn’t good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn’t good enough. I let Jason try it.”¹ Benjy is the original (if incomplete) narrator both in Faulkner’s original concept of *The Sound and the Fury*, as well as the published text. The attention given by critics to Benjy, however, is nearly unanimous in its focus: how Benjy narrates his section. What is therefore missing in the critical discussion of Benjy is the man as a character and the role he provides for the novel. Benjy not only narrates a quarter of the novel, he participates in it. This participation with the Compson family, or better said, the Compson family’s participation with Benjy, provides the motivation for other characters to perform their own moral vision. Benjy’s disability and the inadequacies that define it demand reaction and judgment by various characters; as he participates in the novel as a character, he causes other characters to express their own views. There is no reason to question or compromise the importance of Benjy’s disability in his ability to function as a narrator. His disability deserves to be

seen as a formal technique that shows, in Faulkner’s words, “the relationship of the idiot to the world that he was in but would never be able to cope with.”\(^2\) The disability also demands, however, to be seen as catalytic as it forces characters to make decisions and reveal moralities that can otherwise be muted. Benjy, as defined by his disability, is therefore more than a flat symbol of social and familial degradation or a formal trick to create a sympathetic and confusing picture of a sister. It is fair to think of Benjy as a kind of living, breathing theater stage that not only gives space for other characters to perform (it seems especially appropriate to imagine Benjy’s disability as a space to be walked on in regards to Mrs. Compson and Jason), but also requires that performance. Because Benjy is disabled, which is to say primarily silent and without the slightest shred of power in the Compson home, the space he creates always belongs to the character participating with him. He does not share the space with the character; he merely creates it, and because of his disability, allows other characters such as Caddy, Mrs.

Compson, Jason, and Dilsey to not only compete for domination of the family’s past and future, but to express their motivation for that power.

Judging Benjy as a Compson

If Benjy’s disability is to be discussed as a catalytic force that gives space for other characters to perform, it is first essential to recognize his disability as understood collectively by the other characters, because it is these characteristics that are responded to in all forms of participation with Benjy. As should be expected at this point in the study, the most defining and critically discussed dimension of Benjy is his inability to communicate with others. He is spoken about because he cannot be spoken with. Even Caddy, who speaks the most to Benjy, really speaks at him. When they are children and walking on the ice, she points out, “Ice. That means how cold it is” (9). Lest it be thought that communication is defined here as verbal communication only, it should be noted that Caddy’s words are not in response to anything Benjy has reportedly done, and Benjy gives no real indication in
his narration that he understands what she is saying. Caddy must resort to verbalizing what she assumes he’s thinking. At other times she baits Benjy with rhetorical questions: “You don’t need to bother with him…I like to take care of him. Don’t I. Benjy” (41). Benjy, however, never reports an attempt to respond to these questions. In fact, he doesn’t understand them as questions. When Caddy asks him about feeding, Benjy reports the question in the same way: “‘Don’t you want Caddy to feed you.’ Caddy said.” There is no indication that Benjy attempts to communicate a response to Caddy because he does not seem to understand a response is called for. This is not to suggest that Benjy is completely incapable of expressing any emotion, since Caddy points out that Benjy can see what she is doing with one of her boyfriends.

It is to suggest instead that Benjy’s expression of emotion that must be interpreted by Caddy is not intended to be an attempt at communication. Only Caddy’s willingness to read Benjy makes her brother’s actions at all communicative.

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3 Throughout Benjy’s sections, questions put to him by Caddy and others are punctuated with periods, never question marks.
Luster, the only other character who attempts regular communication with Benjy, receives the same silence as Caddy. Luster is left to either assume Benjy’s voice or simply give a monologue to his charge. Once again the questions are rendered as statements that need no response from Benjy:

Here you is, Luster said. Look what I got. He showed it to me. You know where I got it.
Miss Quentin give it to me. I know they couldn’t keep me out. What you doing, off in here. I thought you done slipped back out doors. Aint you done enough moaning and slobbering without hiding off in this here empty room, mumbling and taking on. (46)

What communication Benjy does succeed in is through the form of bellowing. Again, while Benjy’s bellowing relates to a distinct desire, we should not assume that the bellowing assumes a desire to communicate. Nevertheless, the family can interpret some meaning out of Benjy’s moans and whimpers. The family knows, after the departure of Caddy, that Benjy longs for his sister. They understand that Benjy to some degree unites the past with the present, so that he can never understand why his
sister is not coming over the hill. This inability to separate the present from the past is a trait that unites him to his brothers Quentin and Jason. At the same time it demonstrates why his character is more appropriate to giving space for other characters to perform than his brothers: all three Compson men express this conflation of past and present, but only Benjy performs it to the knowledge of others.

Benjy’s section is told famously without demarcating a chronology because within his mind there is no chronology to demarcate. The italics given in the text are for the reader’s benefit and suggest no separation in Benjy’s mind, so that Benjy moves from Damuddy’s death and Caddy in the tree to hunting with Luster for a quarter. Quentin, though more moderate, is essentially the same in this respect, as during the day of his planned suicide he thinks of his past, seeing himself impotently defending Caddy and the family’s honor and confessing to his father that he committed incest. This reverie is so pervasive a part of Quentin’s narration that when Gerald hits him in the face, the reader doesn’t even witness the punch. Quentin is so far down the rabbit hole of his past that his present is obscured;
when he returns to the present he has already been punched and Shreve is doing his best to stop the bleeding. Jason conceptualizes time the most conventionally, but he nevertheless allows his past to absorb into his present. His disadvantages and resentments from the past control his every action, leading him to grossly villainous acts as when he merely shows his niece to her mother and keeps the carriage moving, cruelly keeping his word of showing Baby Quentin to Caddy in only the most absurdly literal way. Though it appears less in the form of his narration, Jason too is controlled by the past he feels robbed him of advantages granted to Quentin and former generations of Compsons. This is all consistent with how Jean-Paul Sartre understands all of the Compson family: “They never look ahead. They face backwards as the car carries them along.”

Benjy’s disability, however, makes this communication inherently different than his brothers’ narrations because Benjy performs this conflation of past and present as a character. The other characters that

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surround Benjy are perfectly aware of this making present
the past. Luster knows that shouting “Caddy” will make
him re-live the experience of losing his sister, and the
entire family understands Benjy’s attempt “to organize a
response to loss.”⁶ Those surrounding Benjy know, for
instance, the serenity Caddy’s slipper can bring him.
Although Quentin is obsessed with the past and carries it
to Boston, he does not live his life in a way that this
obsession is physically articulated. His suicide can be
read as a kind of physical articulation of his
relationship to the past, but only by the reader. The
characters in the book never understand Quentin’s suicide
as a failure to come to terms with an established past
and an impossible present and future. While Quentin and
Jason are defined by their relationships to the past like
their brother, they are not understood by other
characters through this relationship like Benjy is. What
communication Benjy is allowed through bellowing and
“slobbering and moaning” is seen by others as a
performance of his inability to separate the past from

the present. Therefore, participation with Benjy implies an understanding in the other characters that they must communicate with the past and present at the same time.

The lack of articulation in Benjy’s other defining characteristic is reminiscent of Stevie in The Secret Agent: Benjy’s complete uselessness, which renders him totally dependent on others. His narration opens with Luster hunting for his lost quarter, calling out to Benjy, “Aint you going to help me find that quarter so I can go to the show tonight” (3). Benjy, of course, will not help Luster, nor will he even desire to. When Benjy aids Uncle Maury in his secret affair with Mrs. Patterson, Benjy’s participation does not come from any desire in the boy, rather Uncle Maury’s desire to use a messenger who does not know any better. What usefulness Benjy does provide to Uncle Maury as a messenger depends

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7 Critics such as Cleanth Brooks, and to a certain extent Faulkner himself, see this making the past present in Benjy’s disability as its sole defining characteristic: “Benjy is almost locked into a timeless present. He has not much more sense of time than an animal has, and therefore has not much more freedom than an animal has” (65). I am more inclined to believe Ted Roggenbuck’s position that Benjy is an adaptive human being. His associative tendencies evolve as time goes on based upon his treatment. Roggenbuck points out that “Benjy can do little to shield himself in his innocence, but in the earliest episodes he recalls he does seek tenderness and help from those around him. In 1928 he does not, and wisely so. Benjy knows that nobody around him can provide what he wants” (584).
only on Caddy’s accompaniment, so that when Benjy attempts to deliver a secret message to Mrs. Patterson alone, the plan is ruined: “You idiot, Mrs. Patterson said, I told him never to send you alone again” (9).

Whether his caretaker is Dilsey, T.P., Caddy, or Luster, it is unanimously understood that because of his disability Benjy can do nothing for others nor himself. His attempts at being useful to himself by meeting his own needs, whether they are physical or emotional, always fail. His “attack” on the school girl, which leads to his castration, is, if nothing else, an attempt at something he cannot accomplish: the word “try” is used nine times during the passage, and each time it is used it suggests a failure:

I was trying to say and I caught her, trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. I tried to get it off my face, but the bright shapes were going again...I tried to cry...and I tried to keep from falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes. (34)
When Benjy stands at the gate T.P understands it for what it is: a longing for Caddy. When T.P. tries to get Benjy away from the gate, he speaks to him in terms of uselessness: “You can't do no good looking through the gate, T.P said...You can't do no good, holding to the gate and crying” (33). Benjy is simply unable to occupy himself in any useful way. He needs dolls or jimson weeds provided by Caddy and Luster. Benjy’s disability performs uselessness so that every aspect of his life is dependent upon others. He cannot communicate, nor can he simply “look at the fire and be quiet like mammy told [him]” (37). He is always useless and always dependent.

These two characteristics define the separation of Benjy from those around him. His disability, therefore, creates an isolation that sets him outside the normal rules that define relationships in the novel. To the more benevolent Caddy and Dilsey this isolation demands protection and care, while to Mrs. Compson and Jason it creates an inescapable burden, both in terms of family reputation and financial status. All interactions with Benjy force an ethical response from the characters who surround him: they are given the opportunity to speak and care for—or conversely, speak against and disregard—a
person who in his nature is unable to do so for himself. This is to say, Benjy’s disability not only can help define characters in how they specifically care for him, but how they view him and respond to his disability expresses ethical opinions about other subjects such as honor, family, and race. While every character could be seen through the lens of their treatment of Benjy, such an analysis yields the greatest results with those characters who appear with him most often in the text, and it is these characters that this essay is solely concerned with: Caddy, Mrs. Compson, Jason, and Dilsey.  

Judging Benjy by a Compson

Faulkner’s tenderness toward Caddy is well documented, as is his belief that she is the true center of the novel. He describes the novel himself in this way: “It’s a tragedy of two lost women: Caddy and her daughter.” What Faulkner understood Caddy to be became frustrating both for the writer (“I tried the third

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8 Luster, although he spends perhaps the most time with Benjy, is never represented with a complex moral vision. He is a teenager who wants to play and be unburdened from his charge. His place in this essay is defined more by how Jason uses him to care for Benjy, and conversely how Dilsey uses him to care for Benjy.
9 Faulkner, “Interview with Jean Stein, 1956” 16.
brother, because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on”) and critics who attempted to fully define her with a rigid conceptualization. My intent here is not to create a complete analysis of Caddy, rather to see how part of Caddy’s character is expressed through her relationship to Benjy, especially in terms of her relationship to the aforementioned inadequacies defined by his disability.

From her first appearance in the novel Caddy is immediately understood as separated from the rest of the Compson family. In Eileen Gregory’s oft-referenced essay about the central Compson sister, Caddy’s initial appearance in the novel “is an act of disobedience…From the beginning Caddy’s behavior is unconventional, and her defiance is at odds with the rigid, unnatural moral concern of Quentin—the true heir of his parents’ prohibitive and pessimistic moral beliefs.”

At Damuddy’s death she is the one who refuses to listen to her father and to Dilsey, instead climbing the tree to see into the home. This separation, of course, only increases when Caddy’s sexuality begins as she becomes an

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object of worry and distress for every member of the family. Without trying to force a theoretical label on her, Caddy acts as a kind of other in the family. As Minrose Gwin states, “Often we feel that Caddy isn’t where we think she is, that her space is somewhere else.” It is only natural, then, that she should cling to the family member so obviously other-ed in the Compson home. It is Benjy with whom Caddy sympathizes with the most, and it is only his distress that causes Caddy to question any sexual behavior. Her maternal relationship to Benjy therefore gives her the space in the novel to perform that otherness, beginning well before any sexual rebellion could have given her the same space.

Caddy’s separation from the family comes to a literal fruition when she is left by Herbert Head and her mother does not allow her to raise Quentin at home. As a catalytic force, however, Benjy allows this separation of mother and daughter to be seen years earlier. Early in Benjy’s section, Mrs. Compson calls her son over to be

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kissed goodnight. The rivalry between mother and
daughter over the care of Benjy is clear:

“My poor baby,” she said. She let me go.
“You and Versh take good care of him honey.”

“Yessum,” Caddy said. We went out. Caddy
said,

“You needn’t go, Versh. I’ll keep him for
a while...You’re not a poor baby. Are you. Are
you. You’ve got your Caddy. Haven’t you got
your Caddy.” (6)

In only a few lines Caddy exerts a rival authority
against her mother, telling Versh to do the opposite of
her mother’s wish. She then calls Benjy the very
opposite of what her mother called him. Critics are
obviously right in seeing the maternal instinct in Caddy
in this scene. She must also be seen, however, as a kind
of other-mother, a rival to Mrs. Compson, directly
disputing any words Mrs. Compson may have for Benjy.
When Mrs. Compson later calls Caddy to bring Benjy to
her, the conversation between the two rival mothers again
involves dispute. The dialogue between mother and
daughter should be understood as a litany of you-
can’t/but-I-will statements:
“He’s too big for you to carry…”

“He’s not too heavy.” Caddy said. “I can carry him.”

“Well, I don’t want him carried, then.”

Mother said. “A five year old child. No, no. Not in my lap. Let him stand up.”

“If you’ll hold him, he’ll stop…”

“Don’t Candace”…

“I like to take care of him. Don’t I. Benjy.”

“Candace.” Mother said. “I told you not to call him that…Nicknames are vulgar. Only common people use them. Benjamin.” she said… “Take that cushion away, Candace.”

“Hush, Benjy.” (41)

Because Benjy is completely dependent upon others, his disability enables the conflict for the rivalry between mother and daughter to be expressed. His inability to communicate lets his very personhood become the silent, unquestioning site for one of these two characters to dominate the other.

Caddy’s maternal care for Benjy also heightens the tragedy of her exclusion from visiting her own biological
daughter. I do not mean to suggest that without Benjy we could not infer that Caddy is devastated by Jason’s refusal to let her see Baby Quentin. Her previous maternal actions toward Benjy, however, do increase the tragedy, as well as the irony, of her position of begging her brother to see her own daughter. When Jason mistreats Benjy’s dolls when they are children it gives Caddy space to become Benjy’s defender: “‘He cut up Benjy’s dolls.’ Caddy said. ‘I’ll slit his gizzle…I will.’ Caddy said. ‘I will.’ She fought. Father held her. She kicked at Jason. He rolled into the corner, out of the mirror” (42). As a boy, Jason’s response to this treatment is to crawl into a corner and cry, lying in order to save himself from his sister’s righteous indignation. Benjy therefore, gives the ironic context to make Caddy’s supplication to Jason all the more pitiful, and Jason’s villainy all the more vengeful: “‘Jason,’ she says, looking at the grave, ‘if you’ll fix it so I can see her a minute I’ll give you fifty dollars…I’ll give you a hundred,’ she says. ‘Will you?’” (128). The caring mother figure from the first section of the novel is now the disgraced mother of the third
section. Caddy’s mothering of Benjy makes such a scene particularly painful, as well as particularly heinous.

Benjy’s total inadequacy caused by his disability also proves to be the catalyst for Caddy to express her own ambivalence to her sexual behavior as a teenager, giving nuance to a character critics threaten to reduce to a symbolic rebel of patriarchy. In Quentin’s section we know how much Caddy’s sexuality bothered her Harvard-bound brother, but Quentin’s narration does not allow us to see if it bothered Caddy. Benjy, with his inability to understand or communicate his feelings of loss once his sister has lost her virginity, gives space for Caddy to show her own frustration. When Benjy’s appearance brings Caddy away from Charlie on the swing, Charlie calls for her to send Benjy away. Caddy cannot do this, and instead she and Benjy “ran up the kitchen steps, onto the porch, and Caddy knelt down in the dark and held me...’I wont anymore, ever. Benjy. Benjy” (31). Such a scene again reinforces Caddy’s solidarity with the other separated member of the Compson family, thus allowing her to perform her own other-ness. Through Benjy her own ambivalence toward her rebellion can be shown. Outside of her experiences with Benjy, we do not see Caddy
questioning her own sexual performance. It is only because of Benjy’s disability, his inability to understand and communicate his fear of losing the girl with the muddy drawers, that this side of Caddy can be seen. Caddy’s relationship with sexuality is complicated. If Benjy helps create a binary between Caddy and her mother by enabling a rival mother to be created, he also helps deconstruct that binary by showing Caddy as less than convinced that the rejection of her mother’s moral vision of family honor and personal chastity is correct.

Caddy’s embracing of her brother allows her own rejection of—as well as ambivalence toward—the moral vision espoused by her mother to be performed. In this way Benjy’s disability allows Caddy to express the disregard she has for the moral vision of her mother because his disability’s defining characteristics are an assault upon that “honor” that so guides the life of Mrs. Compson. It is only logical then that if Benjy gives space for Caddy to express her morality through her embracing of him, he also gives space for his mother to express her morality by rejecting him.
Mrs. Compson’s moral vision has been most understood by critics through her relationship with her own daughter, especially in regards to the unwanted pregnancy. Dawn Trouard, in her study of unity in the two Compson women, writes, “Since the patriarchy has religiously and relentlessly instructed mothers (and their critics) on the role virginity plays in the marketing of daughters, Mrs. Compson believes that ‘people cannot flout God’s law with impunity.’” Mrs. Compson’s judgment of her daughter is based on the family honor that has been put to shame and will be put to shame if a child is born out of wedlock. Mrs. Compson’s primary concern is with the reputation and worth of the family name. Much like Caddy’s relationship to Benjy gave her space to act out a rivalry toward her mother long before sexuality would heighten any antagonism, so Benjy gives Mrs. Compson space to act out this wholehearted concern with family reputation before her daughter’s collapse.

The first mention of Benjy’s name change is at the suggestion of his mother. Benjy reports, “He was just looking at the fire, Caddy said. Mother was telling him his new name” (36). The reason for the change is immediately dubious, as Dilsey openly questions why Maury is no longer good enough:

His name’s Benjy now, Caddy said.

How come it is, Dilsey said. He aint wore out the name he was born with yet, she said.

Benjamin came out of the bible, Caddy said. It’s a better name for him than Maury was. How come it is, Dilsey said.

Mother says it is, Caddy said. (37)

In perhaps an uncharacteristic moment for the young Caddy, Benjy’s sister is quick to defend the choice made by her mother. The reason for the name is never explicitly stated, though it can be fairly assumed that upon discovering Benjy’s disability, he was no longer worthy of the Bascomb name, or better said, he was no longer able to perform what the Bascomb name meant to Mrs. Compson. Philip Weinstein writes, “Maury seems to

13 Faulkner’s “Appendix” does give an explicitly stated reason for the name change, the same that is assumed here. I choose not to use
serve her way of remaining a Bascomb, of refusing to consummate her entry into Compsonhood.”¹⁴ Benjy, an idiotic stain to his mother, is not allowed to compromise that refuge from Compsonhood.

Other characters’ responses to Mrs. Compson’s attempt to save the name Maury from a curse can help serve as a contrast to Mrs. Compson’s motives. Dilsey responds to Caddy’s explanation of Benjy’s new name by stating, “Name aint going to help him. Hurt him neither. Folks dont have no luck, changing names” (37). If Caddy is either unaware or at this age unconcerned with Benjy’s name, Dilsey is not. She recognizes both the reason for the change as well as the futility, and she responds to both aspects of the change: the name Benjamin will not help him become any less dependent or uncommunicative, nor will being attached to the Bascomb name hurt him. Versh understands the name change through superstition, but the superstition stated is important: “Your name Benjamin now. You know how come your name Benjamin now.  

They making a bluegum out of you” (44). Versh assumes that Benjy is now cursed because of the name change, associating him with a slave whose name change caused him to be “poisonous.” This is incredibly ironic, as it is an inversion of the exact reason for Mrs. Compson making the change. To Versh, Benjy’s name change curses him. To Mrs. Compson, the name change must occur because Benjy curses the Bascomb name. He cannot be associated with Maury for the same vaguely superstitious reasons that ground Versh’s ideas about bluegums.

In Quentin’s section, Mrs. Compson’s attitude of family is even more clearly revealed through her relationship with Benjy, this time outside the specific context of the name change. Benjy’s disability is representative of a stain on her family legacy, so that any disdain for Benjy can be understood as a disdain for the collapse of her pedigree. Mrs. Compson states, “I thought that Benjamin was punishment enough for any sins I have committed I thought he was my punishment for putting aside my pride and marrying a man who held himself above me” (66). Benjy is specifically a punishment for Mrs. Compson’s original act of marriage because that act was detrimental to her own family. To
Mrs. Compson, Benjy is a manifestation of that poison she introduced into the Bascomb line. The very idea of Benjy as an idiot gives space for Mrs. Compson to state clearly her remorse over her own decisions, as well as the morality that resulted from them: family legacy is primary, and an action against the family is punishable by God, representable by the birth of an idiot child.

Even with her implicit revulsion at her son, there is some evidence to see Mrs. Compson as a victim herself; her response to Caddy’s pregnancy is dubious, but must be considered in regards to the pressure Mrs. Compson feels to maintain the semblance of a respectful home. When the “vacation” to French Lick is prepared and Quentin hears crying behind closed doors, Dawn Trouard suggests, “Allowing for a Mrs. Compson who is pressured to live out the role of mother and invalid makes it possible to imagine and to believe that on the eve of packing for French Lick both female faces are tearful behind the door.”\(^{15}\) It is clear, especially in the above quote about Benjy as a punishment, that the name change of her son is partially due to a kind of rebellion from the impoverished (both literally and figuratively) identity

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\(^{15}\) Trouard, “Faulkner’s Text Which is Not One,” 41.
foisted upon her by the Compson name. This motivation reinforces the idea that Benjy catalyzes the expression of Mrs. Compson’s moral vision. Nevertheless, Mrs. Compson’s attitude toward Benjy goes beyond his degradation of the family name, whether that name be Bascomb or Compson. Mrs. Compson’s view of her son expresses clearly her belief that not only is Benjy punishment for sin, but he, as a result of his disability, is a sinner. The belief in Benjy’s sinful nature could be rooted in the stain on both family’s reputation, or it could be that Benjy—painfully accentuated through his castration—will never reproduce. Whatever the cause of the belief, Mrs. Compson believes that Benjy is not merely physically and mentally inferior, but morally inferior as well.

Benjy creates the expression of Mrs. Compson’s assumed superiority over her son in the beginning of Jason’s section, when Mrs. Compson and her favorite son argue about what to do with Quentin who is on the verge of expulsion from school. Jason states his mother “begun to cry again, talking about how her own flesh and blood rose up to curse her” (114). Seemingly, this curse is coming from Quentin, and it is based on her morality
(since the discussion is about Quentin’s lies, and not her birth). Only lines later, Mrs. Compson assures Jason that he is not a curse upon her, suggesting that Mrs. Compson did not only mean Quentin, but her other children (outside of Jason) as well. Mrs. Compson states, “You are the only one of them that isn’t a reproach to me.” Because Mrs. Compson is referencing Quentin’s lying, Caddy’s pregnancy, and her son Quentin’s suicide, the terms “reproach” and “curse” are made based on the immoral behavior of her progeny. To Mrs. Compson, all the reproaches brought to her are by immoral behavior. Since she has excluded only Jason, however, Benjy is implicitly included in this condemnation.\(^\text{16}\) Benjy, whose physical inadequacies seemed to be the curse for Mrs. Compson in Quentin’s narrative, is now associated with those who are morally inadequate.

During the same argument with her son, Mrs. Compson calls out to her dead husband, saying, “Jason, Jason...How could you. How could you leave me with these burdens” (115). Again, what causes this exclamation to her

\(^{16}\text{If Benjy is not included here, then it is only because Mrs. Compson does not even recognize him as a child, and that he is sub-human or sub-child, consistent with a belief in his sinful, or at least fallen, nature.}\)
husband is Quentin’s moral behavior, and not specifically her circumstances of conception. And once more, Mrs. Compson uses the plural, indicating that she means not only Quentin, but her other children as well. Once more Benjy is included in the bemoaning of her children’s immoral behavior, despite the fact that he has specifically done nothing that is morally outrageous to her. His disability is enough to be categorized as immoral.

All throughout the scene, Mrs. Compson fears Jason’s disciplining of her granddaughter because of his temper. She fears he is uncontrollable and twice mentions to Jason as a means of protecting Quentin and calming her son that she’s “your own flesh and blood.” It is this same reasoning that restrains Jason from sending Benjy to Jackson. When Jason states he knows how to free up some money, Mrs. Compson states, “He’s your own brother. Even if he is afflicted” (141). The fact that Mrs. Compson discusses her children’s immorality and includes Benjy in the discussion, and that her defense of her immoral

\[17\] Benjy’s castration is meant to be preventative, since he rushed at the school girls. There is no indication he would have ever harmed them. It is also Jason who is more associated with the castration than Mrs. Compson.
granddaughter is the same as her defense of her “idiot” son, it is fair to assume that in Mrs. Compson’s eyes Benjy’s inadequacies are of a similar nature to Quentin’s. Both of them are punishments and disappointments. Benjy’s disability, which makes him a shame to the family and unable to continue the family in any reproductive way makes him immoral. It is only through Benjy that Mrs. Compson is given the space to express this extreme view of family honor, cast wholly in terms of morality.\(^1\)

Jason submits to his mother’s will and does not take Benjy to the mental asylum in Jackson, but this does not mean Jason is always so deferential in his treatment of Benjy. Just as Benjy enables Caddy and Mrs. Compson to express their morality, so too is Jason provided that opportunity. As is often pointed out in the style of his narration, Jason is considerably more logical and ordered. Like his brothers, he brings the past into his present, picking the scabs of old wounds until they

\(^1\) It is certainly ironic that Mrs. Compson would consider Benjy immoral for his inability to function as a Compson (or Bascomb) and nevertheless make Jason keep him because “He’s your own brother.” While ironic, it should not be seen as considerably inconsistent. Though Benjy is immoral to her, though he is a failure in the family, he is nevertheless family. Neither he nor Quentin can simply be discarded. Such an act would not be seen as honorable.
bleed. This obsession, however, is never at the sacrifice of Jason’s control. His narration is more ordered, as is the Compson home, settled into the tyranny of the one competent Compson child who still remains. He controls Dilsey and Luster, and by extension Benjy. He controls the information his mother receives about Caddy, and the information Caddy receives about Quentin. His plans demolished by his sister’s separation from her husband, he seeks out all that is disordered and attempts to subdue it. Even when his roles are clearly subservient, as when he must wait for the stock numbers at the Western Union or when he performs his salesman role at the hardware store, Jason attempts to exert control. Speaking with his boss, Jason impotently threatens him, stating, “and if you don’t like the way I do, you know what you can do about it” (143). The only reason his boss does not do anything about it is out of sympathy for Mrs. Compson, a fact Jason knows but refuses to recognize. Olga Vickery writes “All [his] arrangements constitute Jason’s way of protecting himself from any intrusion of the irrational. It is his method of assuming control over experience by preventing himself
from becoming involved in circumstances he has not foreseen."\(^{19}\)

Like the women in the family, Benjy provides himself as the site where Jason performs this need for control. Benjy is essentially uncontrollable. His inability to communicate leads to bellowing and wailing that occur at any time or place. Jason, speaking about Benjy, points out that “God knows there’s little enough room for pride in this family, but it don’t take much pride to not like to see a thirty year old man playing around the yard with a nigger boy, running up and down the fence and lowing like a cow whenever they play golf over there” (139). Jason’s words reveal a sarcastic mockery of Benjy’s uncontrollable nature and the effects it has on the family. Jason depicts Benjy as a wild man roaming around a yard; he is a figure which must be controlled. Jason’s proof for this need for control occurs in the “attack” on the girls passing by the Compson home. The subsequent castration is an attempt to contain Benjy’s bellowing, wandering, and (assumed) threats to the neighbor, much like the fence that holds him in the yard. The asylum at

Jackson then not only represents less of a financial burden to Jason, but an increased amount of control over that which is seemingly uncontrollable.

Not only is Benjy the subject of Jason’s need for control, he is also the tool for that control. Luster is “the spirit of play in a world Jason finds all work.” Luster wants to see the show, and knowing this, Jason burns the tickets he owns. If this is trying to suppress that “spirit of play” that Jason is so far removed from he cannot even understand, then Benjy too is a tool to suppress that same spirit. It is Luster’s responsibility, under threat of beating, to keep Benjy in control and away from the view of others, thereby keeping Luster under control as well. Benjy is also used as a threat by Jason to Caddy when she has gone behind his back to the Compson home: “So the next time I told her that if she tried Dilsey again, Mother was going to fire Dilsey and send Ben to Jackson” (130). Jason, understanding Benjy’s disability renders him completely useless, ironically uses this characteristic to control those who would otherwise undermine him. Only Quentin,

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who has no emotional relationship with Benjy other than the disgust she has for him, escapes Jason’s control. Benjy cannot be used to stop her since a threat to Benjy is meaningless to her.

The one moment when Jason seems to intervene for the benefit of Benjy is the last moment of the novel, when Luster has taken the carriage the wrong way around the monument. The incorrect orientation sends Benjy into an unmatched fit of hysterics, described as “horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless; just sound” (199). Jason leaps across the square and, knocking Luster aside corrects the carriage to calm Benjy. This action, however, has given Jason one last moment to perform his need for control. What he is controlling, however, is ultimately pitiful and meaningless. He has lost the control over his niece who has run away with the family’s money, he has lost control of his own masculinity in the attack he receives during the hunt for Quentin, and before his eyes he has lost any semblance of order as Benjy comes unhinged. What he is able to regain, the trotting of a carriage around a monument, means nothing. That which he reigns over is much like Benjy’s disability: useless and unable to communicate anything
important. The taking over the reins is not for Benjy’s own good, as “[Jason] reached back and struck Ben, breaking the flower stalk again. ‘Shut up!’ he said. ‘Shut up!’” (199). Even if Jason rules over nothing but decay, he must have control over it. Benjy not only provides the horrifying chaos that Jason must attempt to fix in his final moment of the book, he provides as well a face for Jason to strike in retaliation to that which, perhaps too readily for Jason, must be understood as meaningless. The last action in the novel, the righting of the carriage, is brought about by Jason’s violence to both Luster and Benjy. Order is returned, but at a cost to Benjy, even if he does not seem to register the assault (and to Luster, even if he can do nothing about it). There is no definitive answer to this purposeless order and the violent, artificial means used to protect it.

Benjy Endures

Although she never wrestles power away from Jason, Dilsey does provide a potential alternative to her employer’s domination over the Compson home, as well as
her surviving family members. Especially witnessed through her interactions with Benjy, Dilsey offers a morality that “can endure the Compsons, but cannot prevail over them.” Faulkner himself states that Dilsey “endures,” and while the “Appendix” is perhaps of dubious use in discussing The Sound and the Fury, this description of Dilsey’s own morality seems particularly apt as it suggests both the lack of domination and being dominated; her voice is not weak enough to be swallowed by Jason, nor is it strong enough to create any lasting hope in the family. This endurance is witnessed in the Easter service Dilsey attends with Benjy, a theoretically triumphant morning which offers no real hope of a resurrection, literal or metaphorical. On her way out she states, “I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin,” an ironic statement about her perspective of the fall of the Compson family through the echo of a title of an everlasting God (the alpha and the omega). She, Luster, and Frony simply carry on, and so too does their relationship with Benjy. Dilsey is never capable of

calming Benjy like Caddy could, but she nevertheless treats Benjy with a quiet dignity only seen even in the more solemn moments of solidarity with Caddy. During the Easter service Dilsey “stroked Ben’s head, slowly and steadily, smoothing the bang upon his brow” (179). Benjy never hushes, but Dilsey carries on with the same composure. When the congregation begins to sing, Dilsey simply tells Benjy to hush, and when the command fails, she gives the exact same command a second time, with no apparent change in her tone: “Hush, now. Dey fixin to sing in a minute” (183). There is finally a moment of peace, a kind of reward for Dilsey and her patience with Benjy, as “In the midst of the voices and the hands Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze. Dilsey sat bolt upright beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb” (185). It is a moment that is quickly washed away with the dismissal of the congregation, and Benjy immediately returns to his whimpering. For one moment, though, Dilsey seems to be rewarded for her endurance, and the object of that endurance in the scene sits next to her, contemplating nothing.
It is Dilsey who bakes Benjy a birthday cake, who ensures that Luster is constantly watching over him. There is no reward for her treatment of Benjy, just as there is no space for her silent endurance to speak within the Compson home. He offers nothing to her and yet she cares for him. She receives no praise for taking him to church with her, yet she brings him. She receives no acknowledgement, and ostensibly needs no acknowledgment to carry on. She understands her position as a black woman as well as Benjy’s position as an idiot: this is simply the way things are, and she will behave decently despite any prejudice to herself or to Benjy. At church Frony states that she wishes Dilsey wouldn’t bring Benjy to church. Dilsey’s response is indicative of her disregard to those external trappings of morality that consume Mrs. Compson: “Tell um de good Lawd don’t keer whether he bright er not. Don’t nobody but white trash keer dat” (181). The humble decency that defines Dilsey’s morality is given expression through her relationship with all the people surrounding her. Benjy’s disability, however, allows that decency to become a kind of alternative to the Compson family because to Benjy, that decency is not ornamental or
pleasant, but necessary. Without Dilsey’s care, Benjy
would not even survive.

Benjy is read as a symbol of Compson decay, as well
as a formal metaphor for the inability of the Compson
brothers to stop seeing their sister as anything but that
child in the tree with the muddy drawers. These
interpretations of Benjy should not be considered
incorrect, but only incomplete. It is not enough to look
at Benjy-as-narrator, or Benjy as a man-child who
attempts to seek his sister in the only resemblances he
can understand. He must also be understood as a
character with whom other characters interact. All
interaction with Benjy is necessarily exceptional because
his disability defines him as a person who will neither
understand nor communicate, as well as constantly remain
dependent on the goodness and benevolent treatment of
other people. Because of this, Benjy forces other
characters to respond to him with their own individual
moral systems that, without the limits caused by his
disability, could not be expressed in the novel. Benjy
therefore becomes a catalytic element, creating the
opportunity for the moralities of Caddy, Mrs. Compson,
Jason, and Dilsey to compete. Benjy himself, however,
has nothing to say; whether he is mute and content with his broken flower or bellowing “tongueless” in horror, he provides the necessary space for others’ moral performance.
CHAPTER IX

MENTAL DISABILITY AS THE POWER OF STORY IN GLENWAY WESCOTT’S APARTMENT IN ATHENS

In *The Sound and the Fury* Benjy’s presence as a mentally disabled man forces other characters to express in their philosophy and interaction with him about what they would otherwise remain silent. Because of this Benjy becomes a constant source of attention in the novel, as expressing about and around Benjy leads to disclosure. Like the youngest Compson son, Leda Helianos, the young daughter in Glenway Wescott’s *Apartment in Athens* enables other characters to express their own visions of identity and ideology, particularly through how these characters choose to narrate their own lives, at times to Leda and at times because of Leda.

In the shadows of Nazi Germany’s final gasps, when the logical extension of American and European eugenics programs were revealed in the concentration camps, Glenway Wescott’s *Apartment in Athens* was published in the United States. The novel places Nazi Germany’s occupying force into the domestic sphere as the Nazi
German Major Kalter is stationed in the home of the subdued, Greek Helianos family. Initially the family must tiptoe around Kalter who manages the household through fear and lectures meant to make the Greeks submit to the wisdom of their cultural masters. Eventually Kalter and the Helianos family come to a straw peace, which only results in Mr. Helianos taking too much personal liberty with Kalter and questioning the Nazi regime. Kalter has Mr. Helianos imprisoned, and his wife must struggle to keep both her sanity and her children secure. Leda is the youngest of these two children, the Helianos’ “subnormal” daughter who is variously described as apathetic, listless, morbid, and backward. Despite this characterization, Leda participates in the climax of the novel when, in perhaps the book’s most sentimental moment, she overcomes her mental disability in order to run to her neighbors’ house and save her mother from death. At first glance, it is enough to make the reader blush: Leda overcoming her disability suggests that the disability was a matter of will power, and if Leda had wanted badly enough she could have been normal all
The critics who have examined the book seem unimpressed with her as well, though certainly not for the same reasons, as Ira Johnson states Leda is not “more than one-dimensional, nor fully emerged from the conception [she is] intended to represent” (155). There are problems, however, simply regarding Leda as a sentimental tool of empowerment or as a failed, “one dimensional” symbol for decay. The reader must wrestle with the fact that if Leda overcoming her disability to save her mother is a sentimental moment meant to please the reader with tropes of normalcy, why does Leda immediately return to her previous, disabled state? Why does she regress back to her initial state so that the last description of her is that of a millstone around her brother’s neck? The portrayal of Leda is a complex one, built into the novel’s ideology about the importance of storytelling. To understand how Leda functions in the novel, attention must be given both to the book’s central theme of storytelling as well as Leda’s role in the

\[^{1}\text{The history of understanding mental disability as a product of an apathetic, weak-willed mind is a long one. See Steven Noll and James Trent’s Mental Retardation in America or Henri-Jacques Stiker’s A History of Disability for examples.}\]
expression of the novel’s different narratives. Leda exists not simply as a mentally disabled character who symbolizes decay in occupied Greece; rather, she creates metaphor for both the redemptive and corrupting power of story. Like the other texts in this study, this metaphorical representation is founded upon the idea that the mentally disabled mind is an empty one, and therefore has no innate quality; Leda’s potential for saving another or harming another is based upon what she is “filled” with by other characters’ stories. Her nothingness, expressed in the novel through silence and “backwardness,” allows her to represent what no other character who is depicted through psychological realism can express: the very nature of story. Therefore, to understand her role is to understand the role of story in the novel, and vice versa.

Story as Redemption or Corruption

In his literary memoir *Images of Truth*, Glenway Wescott writes about the importance of character, and how
characters must be allowed to flourish in the narrative:

"We raise the dead and we make them speak; but for those of us who are true novelists it is not as a means of expressing our particular opinion. We ask the dead questions and pass the information on. We do not simply utter our experience through them. They are not puppets, they have voices of their own."\(^2\) In *Apartment in Athens* this concern with a character’s need to "have voices of their own" is stressed by the characters themselves who are fully aware of the importance of storytelling. Set in a religious country where God is never mentioned, the characters of *Apartment in Athens* understand redemption to be the legacy of the narratives they lived. Cimon, the beloved son of the Helianos family, lives on in the story of the battle on legendary Mount Olympus. Both Mr. and Mrs. Helianos, when imminent death approaches them individually, find redemption in the promise of a future telling of their personal narratives. Even Major Kalter on the eve of his suicide still finds purpose and fulfillment in the legacy of a narrative; the accuracy of

that narrative is, unfortunately, entirely irrelevant to Kalter. Whether the fall of Nazi Germany or Kalter’s own struggles in Greece are expressed is unimportant. What matters is that Kalter has a narrative to pass on to an anonymous German standard-bearer. Each major character in the novel is concerned with storytelling, if not their own personal narrative then perhaps one imagined or assumed.

The very first chapter of Apartment in Athens reads like a prologue: it is a short summary of the family members that serves as an introduction to the arrival of Kalter in the Helianos home. Even within this quasi-prologue, however, the narrator makes clear what is at stake in the narrative: the legacy of the Helianos family, and the continued endurance of their narrative. The chapter opens with the simple line, “All this happened to a Greek family named Helianos” (1). There is an almost mythical simplicity to this opening line, suggesting this family is connected with other classical
families of suffering such as Job.³ This beginning makes clear that the text is not focused in experiments in language or consciousness, but in the story of a single family. The final paragraph of the chapter reiterates not only the focus of the text, but of the importance of the endurance of the story of the Helianos family: “Little did [Helianos] dream how it was to turn out in fact; and how the heroic Helianos’ speak of him today, if not as a hero, at least as a martyr” (9).

If the first chapter’s structure does not signal to a reader the importance of story then the pervasiveness of storytelling should. When Mrs. And Mrs. Helianos consider their own plight in relation to what other Greeks must endure, they are somehow dissatisfied with the domestic nature of their troubles. They do not simply consider survival, but how their situation would be narrated: “It is not easy to tell this kind of domestic ordeal and do it justice, without either exaggerating it or making a mockery of it. It has to be understated or else it will be lifted by one’s words

³ The Book of Job opens with, “A man once lived in the land of Utz. His name was Job.”
above that triviality, ignominy, which is one of its worst aspects. In daily detail, they realized, it was only harrowing, not tragic. It should be told with severity, irony” (35). Once Mr. and Mrs. Helianos realize they would be unable to tell the story with any kind of accuracy, “They decided not to say much about it after it was over, if they lived to see that day. It was too far below the level of what other people recognized as courage” (35). The Helianos’ are less concerned with their problems than they are how their problems will be understood by others. More than they worry about death then, they worry about the reception of the story of their lives.

Based on how story is used throughout the text, it is clear that the characters all believe that story itself is an instrument of power. To be able to tell a story is a way to create the identity of the teller, the subject, as well as the audience. The act of storytelling is an act of power since it is the process of creating a truth for someone else to accept. To tell a story is to create, in essence, a new reality. In a
war novel without battles and bombing raids, the most pervasive power that exists ironically occurs in the ability to narrate.

The two most prominent examples of the act of storytelling creating identity exists in Mr. and Mrs. Helianos themselves. After Mr. Helianos is imprisoned for speaking out of turn with Kalter about the German fate in Greece, he writes a letter on scraps of paper in an attempt to create his own identity through the process of writing. Helianos states, “I have tried never to be pretentious in the intellectual way...I have some worldly wisdom; please believe it! I have been a great reader in my day” (228). Written to his wife, the only way he can be sure that she understands him is to tell his story; it is not, however, the story of his new life and identity in prison, but a narration of his previous life, one that presumably his wife is already familiar with. It is as though Helianos writes to insure his definition of self, especially when he writes of the need for his story to be passed on: “I want you to tell them all our story: the life our German led us last year, and the great change in
the month of May, then how it ended. One thing that has made me lonely here is my not being sure they know the very end yourself; and not have had a chance to talk that over with you” (228). It is an odd farewell letter, and the strangeness of it is squarely felt by Mrs. Helianos who finds the letter emotionally unsatisfying. It is, however, entirely consistent with how people attempt to create their identity.

This is repeated in Mrs. Helianos’ attempt to have Petros, the family member who turned to a life of guerilla warfare, come visit her. Mrs. Helianos repeatedly tells Demos that she wants her cousin-in-law to visit her so that she can tell the great rebel her family’s story. Whereas Helianos’ letter is more vague as to why the story needs to be passed on, Mrs. Helianos is more clear: she wants to cast her narrative in the light of the Greek rebellion. She says to herself, “I will tell [Petros] our story. Perhaps it will interest him. He is a fighter, and I think he must know only those lives that he is fighting with…I will remember to put in the little things to make it interesting” (258).
After the imprisonment of her husband, Mrs. Helianos, who previously had little to do with the rebellion and despised her husband’s family for their involvement in the uprising, desires to recast her story as a political one. At the same time, Mrs. Helianos is willing to give up her personal reputation—that is, let an entirely false story be invented about her—in order to help the rebellion: “She wanted to give [Von Roesch, a German officer] false information, useless to him, disadvantageous to him, or even fatal if they had good luck” (261). Mrs. Helianos echoes her husband’s motivation of wanting her story to be useful somehow, but she goes further by allowing her present identity to be replaced by a false personal narrative of obedience to the Germans that will aid the rebellion through deception.

It is not only Mr. and Mrs. Helianos who attempt to allow their identities to be formed through story. Demos creates a false personal narrative to hide his own identity, and through fantasy the Helianos’ son Alex attempts to create himself into something vengeful and
heroic. Kalter too attempts to create his self through narration by way of his suicide letter. In it he explains to Von Roesch his plans and motivation. Unlike other characters we don’t have access to Kalter’s mind, so we can’t be sure that his reasoning in his suicide letter is sincere. For present purposes, however, sincerity is irrelevant. Kalter in his letter wants to define himself not as a coward who could not endure the loss of family, but as a faithful Nazi who insures domination even after the grave. Kalter writes, “Perhaps [the Lieutenant] will have some method of explaining the circumstances of my death, to serve their purpose in some way, in the checking of the Greek resistance. Thus even in death I may still serve a little useful purpose, for the fatherland” (189). In all of the above cases a person’s public and private identity (the boundaries between the two are necessarily diminished by the inclusion of spouses and family, as well as enemies and public knowledge) are created through the act of storytelling. What is perhaps most astonishing about this is that all of these examples of creating a self
through storytelling succeed. The narrator tells us that the Helianos story will continue; Demos is successful as a Greek double agent; the Helianos’ son Alex ends the novel on the way to becoming a hero; and although Kalter’s mission doesn’t succeed as he wishes, it is only because of the intervention of Von Roesch, not the inadequacy of Kalter’s narrative.

If story can create the characters’ identity, it can also attempt to create the identity of others, either as subject or audience. This is perhaps most readily seen through a subject who never actually appears in the novel: the martyred Helianos son, Cimon. The reader’s only relationship with Cimon is through Mr. and Mrs. Helianos who consistently grieve his loss, so the identity of who he actually once was is unrecognizable. Nevertheless, Cimon does have an identity based on how Mr. and Mrs. Helianos understand him. Helianos states to Kalter, “I lost my son, two years ago on Mount Olympos...My elder son; he was worth more than little Alex and little Leda” (131). The inclusion of Mount Olympos certainly adds to the grandeur of their son, a grandeur that the
narrator states is actually too much to bear for the couple. Cimon ironically becomes so great in his parents’ minds that they can no longer think about him. Early in the novel the narrator states, “Mr. and Mrs. Helianos themselves could never forget the loss of their elder son, their Cimon...But, as Greeks having a natural realism and a sense of the absoluteness of death, they somewhat closed their minds to this; at least they kept silent for each other’s sake” (7). The perfected status of their dead son becomes so great that it is too painful to continue his story.

If there is a more apparent example of the story creating the identity of the subject, it is perhaps in Kalter’s attempt to constantly create the truth not only about the war, but about the entire world: the Germans, the Greeks, himself, and the Helianos family. Kalter’s speeches in the living room of the Helianos home attempt to forge an identity of all those things he cannot control, and to a certain degree he fails in this. The reader knows, even at the publishing of the book in 1945 (and imagining, if it is possible, how Wescott perceived
his readers while writing), that Kalter is wrong about Nazi Germany winning the war. The reader also knows Kalter is wrong about the Helianos family as the narrator allows us access into the Helianos’ inner thoughts, which reveals Kalter’s inaccuracy. If Kalter is unable to create the identity of the subject that he constantly speaks about, he nevertheless does echo the fear that is pervasive through the text about story: if story has the ability to create a person’s self, it also has the ability to corrupt that self.

It is a testament to the power of story throughout the book that Mrs. Helianos fears what Kalter’s stories will do to her husband. Of course, Kalter’s living room lectures and stories do not so much corrupt Helianos as soften him to speak too informally to the Major, which leads to his imprisonment by an enraged Kalter. Helianos is able to reject Kalter’s version of the war and of Greece, thinking, “when he tried to contemplate in its entirety, as a whole, it fell to bits, and he felt inclined to giggle” (108). This should not be used, however, as evidence that the use of narrative is somehow
impotent or unimportant. The fate of Kalter himself proves otherwise. Kalter, no matter how he attempts to create his suicide in his letter, is unable to cope with the death of his family, calling his inability to forget their passing a “psychopathic condition.” He is unable to bear their pictures in his room as that narrative of his life in Germany has been usurped by death and pointlessness. When Kalter tells Helianos about his wife’s death the grief returns to him. There is no coldness or distance in Kalter, and it causes Helianos to think, “It was a good story...as he listened to it he noted that Kalter’s peculiar rough grudging voice was just right for it, softened by his fatigue, with the cadences of grief” (125). Kalter essentially relives the moment by his wife’s deathbed, a clear indication of his inability to distance himself from the memory of her passing.

Mrs. Helianos fears for what Kalter’s stories may do to her husband, but she also fears for what other stories will do to her own family. From the beginning of the novel Mrs. Helianos, perhaps more than any other
character, recognizes the power that story has, and for
that reason fears storytelling as much as she uses it.
When first explaining the characters of the Helianos
family, the narrator states, “Alex confided to Leda all
his fantasy of taking revenge on some German, often with
extreme passion, with details of childish atrocity,” to
which Mrs. Helianos responds that “Alex should be
punished for his wild talk, not only because of its bad
effect on Leda but for his own sake and for their sake”
(4). There is no attempt to define exactly what this
“bad effect” is for Leda, whether it be more of her
apathy and listlessness or a kind of enraged, nonsensical
violence. There is some indication, if Mr. Helianos is
to be believed, about what these kinds of stories can do
to the soul. Helianos states that when he hears of
atrocities, “I may giggle. I suppose it is animal
instinct; rejoicing in the very simple fact that at the
moment I am hearing them they are not actually happening
to me” (34). Whether this is the “bad effect” for Leda
is unknown, but it does corroborate Mrs. Helianos’ idea
that the corrupting possibility of stories is always
present. This possibility of corruption is not necessarily tied to atrocity and horror, either. When Kalter temporarily leaves the Helianos home for a sabbatical back in Germany, Alex begins repeating his father’s words about the German ranks, and how their own ineptitude can be classified. The story appeals to Helianos’ ego because it is a repetition of his own thought, but it is terrible to Mrs. Helianos. There is no suggestion here that there is violence in the story, only that it can corrupt the way the Helianos’ will look at Kalter when he returns from Germany. To Mrs. Helianos this corruption takes the form of sloppiness and nonchalance. It is a fear that, of course, is verified, as this casual attitude is what leads to Helianos’ fatal mistake of speaking out of turn with Kalter. More than just the moral corruption of a person’s mind then, a story is also capable of training a person to be weak or unprepared. Even the seemingly innocuous stories of the death of Evridiki, the former maid, or the death of the bull-terrier has the ability to adversely affect the mind. When Helianos himself hears of these deaths they
affect his dreams, causing him “various emotion” that he is unable to control.

On the genesis of *Apartment in Athens*, Wescott states, “In the autumn of 1943 a Greek friend suggested I take the fate and symbol of his country instead of France; and with a little anecdote of a Greek family which he mentioned in passing, I began again, to far better purpose.” The switch Wescott made is certainly beneficial to the novel as it provides a subtext of the rivalry between the Germanic doctrine of order and domination with the Greek (perceived) chaos of mythology and Socratic philosophy. The switch is less successful when one considers that in the novel Greece is essentially an agnostic country. The only religion of Greece mentioned is that of Greek classics; the Greek Orthodox church which at least nominally dominates the Greek culture is wholly absent. No Greek character makes any reference to God, only superstition. In one of the few critical works on the novel, Ira Johnson states, “The Helianos, man and wife are...represented as secular

saints." It is an accurate assessment of Mr. and Mrs. Helianos as in Apartment in Athens since the legacy of one’s narrative is the sole type of redemption possible. No character wonders about an afterlife or judgment. Pervasive throughout the text is not divine justice or mercy but the overwhelming power of the story which has the ability to transform the individual into a new person. In a religion-less Greek culture, the story takes on the power of corruption or redemption.

Leda as Corruption

Thus the character of Leda can begin to be seen as not only an important figure in the novel’s plot, but in her role as the embodiment of storytelling. Leda is prominent not because of what she can do, but what she cannot do; her inability to tell any story of any kind makes her inherently unique from all other characters in the text. Because she exists so separately from everyone else (even Alex, her brother who she undoubtedly adores,

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but nevertheless cannot communicate with) she is able to become the embodiment of the novel’s preoccupation with the power of story. She operates then as a kind of quasi-Helianos who is not so much a real person but the vessel of the Helianos (and Greek) stories that surround her. To begin to see this, however, it is important to examine how Leda is made separate from the other characters in the novel, because it is in this separation that the space for Leda to operate as metaphor exists.

In speaking of how other characters relate to Leda, it is fair to split the field into two categories: her brother Alex, and everyone else. Alex is the only one in the book who gives consistent worry and attention to Leda. Although Alex tells many stories, we never hear much from him as those stories are paraphrased and characterized by the narrator. It is difficult then to know how Alex precisely speaks to his sister, but as readers we are convinced from the outset of the novel that he has complete devotion for her. The narrator states, “Alex took care of little Leda. He understood that sensibility of hers, so mixed up with dullness, he
He never sees his sister as a liability, even when he must deposit her in safe places so that he can continue his potentially dangerous errands. The two siblings serve as a kind of disabled whole, since Alex is described as having stunted growth and a distended belly from hunger. Leda’s physical descriptions are at a minimum, but where Alex is able-minded and weak in body, Leda is clearly weak in mind. By one measure then the two complete one another, forming together a whole that even while combined cannot measure up to the memory of their brother Cimon. Alex, however, is nevertheless positioned differently in the novel than Leda. As occurs due to Leda’s mind, his physical deformities make him a worry and embarrassment to his parents, but because he is allowed the ability to both tell and reject stories, he is not the empty vessel that Leda is. His inner monologue is reported by the narrator, suggesting an inherent value in a novel in which the impulse to tell stories is a basic human drive, and he progresses in a way that ultimately Leda does not. It is because of what
Leda is not allowed and what is given to Alex—the ability to tell a story rather than simply endure one—that she becomes his constant audience. This causes an intimacy between the two so intense that their parents seem to assume there is some kind of misdeed at play. When considering how Leda relates to Kalter as well, Mrs. Helianos states to her husband, “It is a strange nature. I used to think that perhaps her love of Alex was something like incest. Now perhaps this, you might say, is a kind of treason. But it does not matter, she is an innocent” (40). Mrs. Helianos’ statement here is filled with telling information both about the intimacy her children have between one another, and about how Mrs. Helianos feels toward her daughter.

Mrs. Helianos has apparently undergone a change in her understanding of Leda, as she no longer feels the relationship is incestuous. It does, of course, imply she once did, perhaps echoing the shame that her husband more openly admits to having for his daughter. Mrs. Helianos also refers to Leda as “an innocent.” The article here is important as it serves as a way to other
Leda. Innocence is not simply a characteristic of Leda, it is a form of categorization, clearly separate from the rest of the characters. Even though Mrs. Helianos is criticizing her daughter’s relationship with Major Kalter, she nevertheless intends to absolve her daughter from the behavior. The fact that her language works to categorically separate her daughter from herself and others is an irony that characterizes much of Mrs. Helianos’ relationship with her Leda. Despite her attempt to defend Leda, and the marked similarities the narrator states exists between the two, mother and daughter are constantly seen as divided from one another.

Mrs. Helianos attempts to mother Leda by protecting her from Alex’s stories, but the narrator asserts that this is a misguided gesture, and ultimately more harmful than that which she tries to protect her daughter from: “As a matter of fact Alex’s cruel patriotic make-believe did not depress Leda so much as her mother’s fuss and foreboding” (5). Here again is the irony between mother and daughter, so that mother’s attempts at protection and intimacy are counterproductive. The narrator sees mother
and daughter as psychologically similar to one another, stating, “There was an affinity between Mrs. Helianos and Leda, somehow closer than their affection: the anxious motherly imagination reflecting itself in the little one as if it were a dark cloud over a small stagnant pool” (5). It is this very affinity, however, that pushes Mrs. Helianos away from her daughter, as it is in being a reflection of her mother’s instability that makes her unable to equal what Cimon once was. What seemingly unites them is what pushes Mrs. Helianos away from her daughter so that ultimately mother and daughter are separated from one another.

Mr. Helianos does not prove to be any more of an intimate connection with Leda than his wife. Helianos openly confesses that Leda and Alex combined cannot equal Cimon. When Kalter makes recommendations to Helianos about how to improve the mental state of his daughter through German scientific discovery, the narrator states, “He was ashamed of Leda, ashamed for Leda” (82). While Mrs. Helianos’ attempts at protecting Leda generally fail or are misguided, they are at least attempts. Mr.
Helianos is completely distanced from his daughter with no attempt to be otherwise. The only time Helianos shows any concern for his daughter is in an ironic instance of Greek pride when Kalter shows concern for the little girl.

Leda’s relationship with the Major is her most complicated of the book, and is arguably the only relationship that undergoes any kind of evolution. Before Kalter returns to Germany, when he is still overtly cruel and rigid with the Helianos family, Leda is fascinated with the Major. The narrator states, “When she heard [Kalter’s] step outside the front door, his key in the keyhole, she would slip quickly into the corridor and stand smiling up at him, seductive, like a tiny courtesan. Sometimes she took his hand, or reached out her small grimy hand to give his fine uniform a sort of envious, luxury-loving stroke” (39). This (at least) external expression of admiration, however, quickly gives way when Kalter leaves and Leda is entertained by Alex’s
fantasies of killing the Major upon his return.\(^6\) When Kalter does return to the house Leda has lost her affection for him, nor does Kalter have any affection for the girl. His concern for the girl becomes clinical, and even that is fleeting at best, as Kalter forgets about his promise to Helianos to help Leda nearly as soon as he utters it.

If all the adults keep Leda at a distance, so too does the narrator, creating the overall effect that Leda is inherently different than the other characters and must be treated as such. The narrator seems unable to describe Leda’s mental disability in satisfying terms, and consistently shifts pejorative modifiers of her mental state. To the narrator Leda is morbid, apathetic, listless, dull, backward, and subnormal. Interestingly, in 1945 Wescott’s narrator is not using clinical words to

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\(^6\) This is also the moment when Wescott’s description of Leda can only be described as baffling. Upon Kalter’s departure, the narrator states, “they all danced around and hugged each other, and the children asked innumerable questions” (43). That Wescott would include Leda in the narrator’s referral to the children asking questions makes no sense, since Leda is rendered virtually silent. There are no qualifiers to this statement, nor is there ever a reference to it again. That Leda suddenly spoke perfectly and then returned to her normal state is entirely inconsistent with the rest of the text. Since it’s never referred to again, perhaps it is best to consider the moment an anomaly that Wescott simply did not account for.
describe the girl. The age of eugenics does not reach into the vocabulary of the narrator who avoids what would have been clinical terms such as “idiot” and “moron.” Of course, neither the narrator’s pejorative terms (which often reflect the thoughts of the Helianos parents) nor his avoidance of eugenic terms implies a desire to create distance with Leda. What does suggest this distance, however, is the narrator’s inability to know the thoughts of Leda. The narrator is privy to all of the Helianos family’s thoughts, even Demos. The only major characters that the narrator does not have access to are Kalter and Leda. The cause of Kalter’s shift in attitude toward the Helianos family is discovered only when Kalter announces it to Helianos. Kalter’s suicide is foreshadowed only in his own words and the thoughts of Mr. and Mrs. Helianos.

This same ambiguity of motivation and thought occurs with Leda. To return to the moment when Leda is described as a courtesan fawning over Kalter, the narrator tries to understand Leda’s motivation:

she seemed to grow less fond of her brother.

Perhaps she was disappointed in him, now that
he no longer entertained her with terrible stories. Perhaps he had noticed her friendliness toward the captain before anyone else did, and scolded her...Was there more cleverness in her retarded little mind than they had given her credit for? Was she seductive in order to be on the safe side, in the terrible vague anxiety of infancy, in self-defense? (39)

What is important here is that the narrator does not know. The only other times in which the narrator asks rhetorical questions about someone’s motivation is when the person described does not know their motivation. This is not the situation with Leda. The narrator is in the same position as the rest of the Helianos family, including Alex: they simply do not know what happens in her mind. Not only does this very fact distance Leda from both her family as well as the narrator, but it also associates her with Kalter whose motivations are just as mysterious.
The effect on the reader is to be distanced from Leda just as the other characters are. If the reader is intimate with the thoughts of Mr. and Mrs. Helianos, then they are as well intimate with the confusion and perhaps shame the parents have for their child. Because of the sympathy the reader has with Mr. and Mrs. Helianos there is no textual indication that the reader should sympathize with that one person who they cannot sympathize with. When Leda falls asleep in her mother’s arms, she is described as having a “face like a bad dream” (170). Because we immediately enter Mrs. Helianos’ thoughts after this description and these thoughts describe her finally having sympathy for her son, there is no indication that we should reject the narrator’s description of Leda’s body.

In looking at this separation between Leda and the other characters it becomes clear that she operates differently than everyone else. What she is allowed in the novel, as well as what the reader is allowed to see of her, is caused by the separation due to her mental disability. In writing about disability and narration,
David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder write, “The ability of disabled characters to allow authors the metaphorical ‘play’ between macro and micro registers of meaning-making establishes the role of the body in literature as a liminal point in the representational process.”

Her disability then enables her to be used as metaphor where others’ bodies (though in this case, minds) would not. Leda’s separation from the other characters acknowledges this difference, and actually enhances the ability for her to perform as a metaphor. Her disability seemingly does not allow her to participate in the power of the story. It does, however, allow her to embody it as she is the passive audience who must constantly endure stories; she is blankness on which others’ narratives are written, whether they involve her or not. Other characters can “protect” themselves, or have the ability to narrate their own identity into existence either proactively or due to self-defense. Leda must accept others’ narratives, and for this reason becomes the perfect embodiment of the power of story in the novel.

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7 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 62.
Her disability creates the space in the novel for her to act as a metaphor; her disability also performs the metaphor, since the stories that Leda must endure are overwhelming negative and burdensome.

Leda endures the stories of war more than any other character in the novel. She constantly endures the fantasies of her brother, but as the narrator states these are not as traumatic as Mrs. Helianos would suggest. She is nevertheless the only character in the novel, including the Nazi officers, who witnesses true atrocity. Mr. Helianos must speak about rumors on Crete in order to imagine the horrors of war. Leda personally witnesses the aftermath of a massacre: “Eight or ten bodies lay on the pavement, machine-gunned, some with grimacing faces, all with grimacing bodies, rags of flesh in ragged clothing...as they fell they had soiled [the wall], sprinkled it, painted it” (6). The trauma of the event sends Leda into a “listlessness” that the physician cannot account for. Only a random statement from Alex that the reader is not privy to arouses her, though the girl never overcomes what she witnessed: “there was
something always weighing upon her thought, oppressing her spirit, as if the thick little skull were too tight for the melancholy mind” (7).

While Leda is certainly not made “subnormal” by her witnessing the aftershocks of the massacre of Greek citizens, she is nevertheless permanently traumatized by it. What does seem to make her “subnormal,” however, is the very presence of the war. Though Leda’s early childhood is never described, she is constantly being compared to the mood of a moment, so that again Leda endures and reflects the stories she silently encounters. In a shattered, occupied Greece then, she is a metaphor of brokenness and inability. The narrator states Leda, “was wonderfully sensitive to the human atmosphere around her, reacting to the others’ moods, as if it were good or bad weather, sunshine or sundown, like a little plant” (80). This occurs in a moment when Leda seems to be

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8 There is an echo of how mental disability occurs in Melmoth the Wanderer, as in both cases the witnessing of horror either creates or exacerbates the disability. The difference, however, is noteworthy as well. In Melmoth, part of the fear in mental disability is that it can occur to anyone. Here the traumatizing effects of psychological trauma do not necessarily create mental disability. Mrs. Helianos and Kalter both undergo trauma, but the text never suggests that they may plunge into disability. Rage, either against oneself or another, is instead the consequence.
getting better because Kalter has returned from his time in Germany a kinder man, so that Leda reflects that which occurs around her. When her father is arrested and the tension in the house increases, “Leda was having a little new sort of weeping fit daily or every other day, sinking to the floor with her arms crossed over her face, and every breath a tiny moan almost inaudible” (140). When Mrs. Helianos finds her “near-mystical” vision by contemplating her husband and her country’s mythology, she begins to tell legends to her children. She tells Leda about the day-mare who drives a victim mad, making him “talk nonsense at the top of her voice, weep about nothing, and curse no one in particular” (210). Along with the story of Procrustes’ bed, this horror of the day-mare (which echoes the very state of Leda), terrifies Leda and causes her to “shiver, as if in a fever, with her eyes closed and her fists clenched” (211). It is one of Mrs. Helianos’ ironically more maternal moments, but nevertheless evidence that Leda works like an empty vessel, taking in the stories of others’ and operating according to the mood those stories would instigate. In
a time of war then, she is a once-empty-now-filled vessel of terrible stories and witnessed massacres. By her status as the constant audience of stories, she exists as a perpetual reaction to others’ stories. The distance other characters and the narrator, even the reader, feels toward Leda is undoubtedly related to the fact that her own identity is so in flux. She is never her own person: both the position of separation her disability causes as well as what her disability performs insures this.

Even when Leda is not present in the story her identity is shaped by the stories that surround her. When Kalter returns from his time in Germany he no longer finds her infant adoration charming (which is convenient since Leda has ceased adoring him), and proposes a plan to help improve her. Kalter tells Helianos of a young German physician who is “connected with psychotherapy,” and perhaps this doctor “can work a miracle for the poor little thing” (84). How readily Kalter forgets about this idea shows that helping Leda was never the issue. Instead, what is important is the story of German superiority even in the field of psychotherapy and
science. His suggestion to Helianos is not really about the girl’s welfare; he too quickly forgets about it for that idea to be taken seriously. In the same way, Helianos’ reaction is not really about his daughter’s welfare; he is too proud as a Greek to take this suggestion to heart, even if he feels it is a dubious one. While Mrs. Helianos sees no real problem with Kalter’s idea, Helianos feels attacked as a Greek. The very personhood of Leda is not really the problem between these two men; instead, it is the dominance of their cultures. This becomes even more apparent later in the book when the German doctor who was to help Leda is identified as the man who tortures Greeks during interrogation. His relevance to improving a mentally disabled girl is absurd; he exists at the very site where Germans attempt to dominate the Greek resistance. The narrative of German superiority is therefore performed through Leda, as is Greek pride. Helianos admits this, and speaks to the very idea that Leda is not a person but an empty vessel to embody his own narrative when he thinks, “Leda belonged to them, to interpret as they
liked; Leda belonged to them in a way that none but the parents of a shameful child could ever understand” (83).

Leda as Redemption

If Leda does exist as the metaphorical embodiment of story, then she cannot only exist as a figure of decay and corruption. As earlier stated, story within the novel is the closest any person can come to redemption. Thus, if Leda’s disability allows her to metaphorically perform the role of story, she must perform the redemptive side of story as well, and this she does when she runs to the neighbor in order to save her mother. Although her lack of language is still apparent in the few words she says to the neighbors, she nevertheless succeeds at telling a story. In the past she has requested stories from Alex and witnessed stories involuntarily, but finally she is no longer an audience. She performs the positive, redemptive power of story and tells not just that her mother needs help, but that “my father is dead” as well. In her own truncated way, Leda
tells the very story that Mr. and Mrs. Helianos hope will continue, and that the narrator in the first chapter verifies as a heroic tale.

This moment of Leda’s overcoming her disability to save her mother is a sentimental trope in literature with the disabled. Under dire circumstances, the disabled character is able to overcome their handicap, which subtly suggests that if only they felt enough, or only if they wanted it enough, this ability to overcome was always available to them. Although this moment in Apartment in Athens undoubtedly strives for this emotional ploy of overcoming supposed impossibility, Leda’s position as a character keeps this from being overly sentimental. Throughout the book Leda has been less of an actual character than an embodiment of the stories of others. Here she performs this same role, only instead of displaying the horrifying aspects that stories of war and hunger bring, she displays how stories can also be heroic and redemptive. It cannot be forgotten that Leda does not drift away into the background as a reborn daughter, free from her shell of
simplicity and inadequate speech. After her mother is saved she returns to her previous disabled state. For a reader who wants this to be a sentimental moment of overcoming difficulty, this return makes no sense. This is precisely why Leda’s position in the book must be remembered: she is not a character like the rest of the Helianos family, including her brother, of whom the reader has learned intimate details. Instead, she is a metaphorical embodiment of the power of story, both in its corrupting as well as redemptive abilities. There is no “return” truly to speak of, as this would suggest that at Leda’s moment of saving her mother she became a character like the rest of the Helianos family. Instead, she is the same character who is less a person than an embodiment of others’ narratives. In Greece this moment of Mrs. Helianos’ survival is a minor event. Leda, still representing through disability all the narratives she has endured, cannot stay “normal.” Once this event with her mother ends, she returns to her previous self: the site of rivalry between Germany and Greece, expressed
through the horror stories of German domination and
inspirational stories of Greek rebellion.

Leda’s final appearance in the book occurs as her
mother contemplates what will become of Alex. Mrs.
Helianos has finally understood the import of her
husband’s final letter, and now considers herself reborn
in the mission to engage, even through proxy, in the
Greek rebellion. She knows her and Helianos’ story has
the power to affect the war, and she sees that continue
through the very life of Alex. Mrs. Helianos’ last
contemplation of Alex is to imagine him as a fighter with
Petros, her guerrilla cousin, perhaps blowing up bridges.
She considers what to do with Leda, and sees two
possibilities for her: “Was the little one to be a
millstone around [Alex’s] neck always? Perhaps not; he
had so perfectly enslaved her heart to him, she so
delighted to do whatever pleased him: he might make use
of her even upon deadly errands” (266). Mrs. Helianos’
language is filled with Leda as something empty to be
filled by another: she is described as a slave, her
actions are based on another’s feelings, and her volition
is completely dependent on another. This dependence on another comforts Mrs. Helianos as she imagines a narrative for Alex which carves out his own place as a martyr for Greece. Leda’s position in the future, however, is more tentative. She has the ability to be both a millstone around a martyr’s neck or a positive force for the resistance (both of which lead Leda to be a harbinger of death, including her own). As she has done throughout the novel, Leda here embodies the stories surrounding her. Whether the stories of people like the Helianos family or the massacre of Greek civilians will be used to aid the resistance or discourage it is unknown; so too then, is Leda’s role in the future. Just as Leda may aid or destroy her brother, the stories of the horror of war will be a millstone around the neck of the Greeks, or used to help win the rebellion.
CONCLUSION

When I finished reading Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a book narrated by a teenager with Asperger’s who attempts to solve the murder of his neighbor’s dog, I gave it to my wife to read. Her youngest brother has Asperger’s, and I thought she might be interested in the book if for no other reason than searching for her brother in those pages. Throughout the novel Christopher, the narrator, describes his discomfort with, among other things, the color yellow. At one point in the novel, however, when he is forced to stay the night at his mother’s house, he gives in and puts on a pair of bright yellow pajamas. Upon reading this, my wife nearly stopped reading the book, announcing that there was no way someone like Christopher would suddenly tolerate something he was not comfortable with. Primarily, my wife’s reaction was due to her own experience with her younger brother. Just as interesting to me, however, was the fact that Christopher, near the time he concedes about the yellow pajamas, refuses to give his mother a hug despite her emotional plea for more
than the standard high-five he grants his parents. My wife, upon reading Christopher’s rejection of his mother, had no problem registering the meaning of the event: “He won’t let it happen. That’s how he is. That’s how it should have been with the pajamas.”

It is impertinent to criticize the concentration of mimesis my wife had for Christopher’s representation, not only because she is my wife, but because a realization that the book may connect with her own life was why I gave it to her in the first place. Although it is difficult to sound sophisticated and appropriately academic when doing it, we read literature because we find ourselves in literature. As Mieke Bal states, “Literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism, so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease.”¹ Without contradicting myself, there is still more to find in a text like Haddon’s by concentrating less on the mimetic dimension of Christopher’s character. Perhaps because for most of us

¹ Bal, Narratology, 115.
mental disability is non-normative, a kind of othering, this is difficult to do. Worries about fidelity to a real-world referent become much more important to us when we feel representations not only are created solely by archetypes, but also have the ethical imperative to challenge these same archetypes. Yet to see Christopher as a wholly fictional construct in a wholly fictional world reveals the meaning of the text, something much more assignable than the meaning of one author’s intent in relation to a broader culture’s values. Christopher putting on the yellow pajamas and then refusing in the same night to hug his mother creates consequences that are, at least initially, only tangentially related to a culture’s awareness and value of a child with Asperger’s. As is hopefully evidenced by this study, Christopher’s representation could reveal any number of things about what the text seeks to accomplish. To ignore the thematic relationship his representation has with the rest of the novel is to handicap interpretations to anemic, yet broad conclusions. Ironically, the reader consigns a representation of the mentally disabled to the
gutter of simple archetypes when the interpretation is based on whether those simple archetypes exist in the work. By recognizing the representation of the mentally disabled as a part of the foundation of a narrative’s aesthetic, even when those representations are seemingly menial or cruel, the reader benefits no matter what the agenda for reading may have been.

My intent for this study has been a humble one, based simply on the idea that, a) the possibilities of literary expression through the representation of the mentally disabled has not been fully examined, and b) if these representations create unique and complex expressions of a text’s ideology, and mental disability has been ignored as a rhetorical construction, then parts of the text have been ignored as well, and new, nuanced interpretations are possible and necessary. I imagine this to be only the necessary first step of other projects involving the ethics of these representations, as well as studies on their ability to create and/or reflect larger values of either the author or the culture at large.
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