The "Defective" Generation: Disability in Modernist Literature

Deborah Susan Mcleod

University of South Florida, dsmcleod@mail.usf.edu

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The “Defective” Generation:
Disability in Modernist Literature

by

Deborah Susan McLeod

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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Major Professor: Hunt Hawkins, Ph.D.
Phillip Sipiora, Ph.D.
Diane Price Herndl, Ph.D.
Pat Rogers, Ph.D.

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Dedication

To my mother, Betty McLeod, for her love and encouragement.
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Abstract

The “Defective” Generation: Disability in Modernist Literature aims to provide an analysis of how Anglo-American authors in the early twentieth century conceived of, utilized, and portrayed disability in their fiction. Building on the existing scholarship in the field of Disability Studies, I argue that modernists revise the tradition of representation to make disabilities a generational trait rather than a sign of individual deviance. In novel after novel, multiple characters exhibit some form of illness or impairment, which appears as both cause and effect of the instabilities and traumas of modernity. Like many of their predecessors, then, these authors portray diverse health conditions as “defects” rather than natural variations in the human body, and most draw little distinction between the types of “disorders” they represent. This perspective, however, becomes particularly destructive in the era leading up to the Holocaust, when eugenical attitudes would lead to the murder or sterilization of over a million people with disabilities. Modernists also continue to exploit disability’s potential for metaphor and sometimes evoke traditional stereotypes. Unlike traditional representations, however, these works do not resolve what the authors perceive as the “problem” of disability by curing or eliminating it; instead, they portray characters struggling to lead fulfilling lives despite feeling limited by their health. Working against the public’s conception of disability as solely a medical condition, many of these authors further depict the social forces that turn a perceived “difference” into a “disability.”

For a historical review of the medical model of disability, see Longmore “Uncovering.”
The project is arranged into four chapters. In the first, “Idiots and Other Degenerates: Disability at the Dawn of Modernism,” I use Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Secret Agent* to illustrate how disability becomes characteristic of a generation, primarily through the influence of degeneration theory. Mocking the popular conception of a society divided into the “fit” and “unfit,” Conrad creates a circle of characters who judge others to be degenerate while ignoring their own similar traits. From that beginning, I move in chapter 2, “Modernist Style: The Inward Turn and Portrayals of Mental Illness,” to an analysis of the effects of stylistic experimentation on depictions of disability in both Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*. The authors’ use of multiple points of view in these works leads to a representation of both an individual’s experience of psychosis and the stigma that can accompany such illness, and, like Conrad, both writers elide the differences between the seemingly able-bodied characters and those they deem disabled. These authors also offer a contrast in perceptions. Whereas Woolf treats shell shock and emotional instability largely as the unavoidable effects of World War I, Fitzgerald links both schizophrenia and alcoholism to decadent behavior, thus aligning himself with the public’s perception of illness as a matter of intent. Moving from style to theme, in chapter 3, “Impaired Relationships: Physical Injury and the Pursuit of Romance,” I explore the ways in which authors depict physical impairments as obstacles to personal relationships. Through a comparison of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and the “Nausicaa” chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, I discuss the intersection of gender identity, disability, and romance. I argue against the critical consensus that Jake Barnes feels emasculated by his injury and that Gerty MacDowell is “doomed” to spinsterhood because she limps, contending that both authors allow their characters to maintain a sense of masculinity or femininity consistent with the hegemonic ideals of their time. While Hemingway presents Jake’s
wound as a physical disability that prevents his having the relationship he desires, Joyce uses Gerty’s limp to mark her as an imperfect beauty in preference to an array of idealized iconic images, and in her encounter with Leopold Bloom grants her the sexual attention that she desires.

In my final chapter, “African American Modernism and a Deadly Game of Blind Man’s Buff,” I shift focus from mainstream to African American modernism with an analysis of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, addressing the author’s use of folklore in relation to the metaphor of blindness. Posing the literally blind Mrs. Dalton as a revenant of the American colonists who ignored the humanity of those they enslaved and as a symbol of continuing oppression, Wright develops Bigger Thomas as both a trickster who exploits the “blindness” of others and a badman who rebels against it. My conclusion then addresses the use of disability metaphors, the attitudes those metaphors expose, and the authors’ apparent agreement with or challenges to contemporary perceptions of disability.

Although critics have previously analyzed specific works or certain aspects of disability representations during this era, this project seeks a more comprehensive discussion of disability in modernist fiction than currently exists. My hope is that it will enhance our understanding of both the period’s literature and the harmful attitudes that existed at the time, which the work of Disability Studies has endeavored to overturn.
Chapter One:

Introduction

Early in Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), the prostitute Georgette makes the casual remark that “Everybody’s sick,” including herself (23). Given her occupation, Georgette is likely “sick” with a venereal disease, but her comment proves to be an astute observation about the state of not only her own narrative companions but of modernist characters in general. As it turns out, the pages of early twentieth-century fiction are rife with illness and impairment. In this study I analyze five canonical texts in addition to Hemingway’s: Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* (1934), and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). In addition to venereal disease, these works feature a multitude of conditions that the authors treat broadly as “disabilities,” including a genital injury, a broken nose, arrow wounds, a painful fistula, “idiocy,” “lunacy,” degeneracy, obesity, stunted growth, gout, lameness, deafness, dismemberment, shell shock, influenza, psychosomosis, invalidism, schizophrenia, blindness, and several cases of alcoholism and what might generally be called emotional instability. Even background scenes are filled with wounded war veterans and overcrowded health clinics. These novels are also not exceptional. A sampling of only the major characters in other contemporary works reveals multiple conditions including heart disease and mental illness in *The Good Soldier* (1915), paralysis and invalidism in *Ethan Frome* (1922), dwarfism,

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2 Although some authors treat specific types of health conditions differently than they do others, the trajectory of most works is to elide that difference, both in terms of the types of disability represented and in the particular nature of an individual’s experience.
blindness, and deafness in *Cane* (1923), “idiocy” and alcoholism in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and “idiocy” and amputation in *Of Mice and Men* (1937).

The advent of Disability Studies in the humanities has called attention to this particular type of character trait, one that proves ubiquitous in literature throughout history but that had, until the last few decades, received little critical attention. Drawing on the analytical tools developed in the areas of gender, race, and sexuality, the work of Disability Studies seeks to understand and expose the ways in which disability as a concept is constructed by various cultures, how bodily differences serve fiction as both character trait and overarching metaphor, and how representations of disabilities—from fiction to telethons—help shape public opinions toward people whose bodies deviate from some perceived standard of “normalcy.” Much of this work emphasizes the contrast between negative images of disabled persons and the productive and satisfying lives that real people with disabilities lead. In fiction, authors’ own experiences and narrative concerns also affect their portrayals, and thus while a writer like Virginia Woolf provides an authentic depiction of one person’s experience while hallucinating, another like Richard Wright rests on a stereotypical portrait of blindness in order to focus instead on the condition’s metaphorical value. Representations of disability and of disabled figures also have “a history that reflects ideological shifts in the perception of the body, of individuality, and of social relations” (Snyder et. al 3), and thus my own work seeks to analyze the specific nature of such portrayals in the modernist period.

My main finding is that this era’s fiction differs from its predecessors in that disability becomes characteristic of the generation itself, rather than of a particular individual. Although “images of disability abound in literary history,” such images have traditionally marked one individual “as unlike the rest of a fiction’s cast” (Mitchell 19, 23). In modernist literature,
however, disabilities proliferate as successive characters are introduced. There seem to be several reasons for this development. In the wake of such social upheavals as the Industrial Revolution, the epistemological shift from faith to science, Darwin’s theory of evolution, Freud’s revelation of unconscious motivations, the emergence of the New Woman, the uncertainties posed by quantum physics, and the devastation wrought by World War I, the modernist era seemed to many an “epoch of crisis” (Levenson 4). It thus seems appropriate, given the era’s conception of disability, that it is no longer the isolated individual, but the generation itself that exhibits signs of physical and psychological damage. These depictions also reflect the prominence of disability in the modernist era as a subject of public discourse. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and extending into World War II, several factors served to increase attention to the public’s health, including the influence of degeneration theory, the emergence of advocacy groups, the development of psychoanalysis, and other advances in medical treatment. Degenerationists, in particular, had drawn a line between the “fit” and “unfit,” blaming the latter for various social ills and spurring physical improvement programs as well as efforts toward segregation or elimination of those deemed “inferior.” Modernists also prefer creating antiheroes over traditional ones, but their particular use of disability as a character’s “flaw” seems in line with the culture’s larger focus on health. The end of the Second World War, however, marks a turning point in this cultural awareness. The Nazis’ “extermination” of as many as 750,000 people with disabilities and sterilization of nearly a half-million\textsuperscript{3} brought international attention to the consequence of eugenics’ programs, and the civil rights’ movement that emerged in the 1950s would eventually situate the disabled as a minority group deserving protection against discrimination.

\textsuperscript{3} These statistics come from Suzanne E. Evans’s study \textit{Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities} (2004), page 18.
In terms of scope, I thus concentrate on the traditionally recognized boundaries of modernism that include British and American fiction dating from about 1890 to 1945 (Mao and Walkowitz 738). Although I support recent efforts to broaden that framework temporally, geographically, and formally, this wider range of New Modernist Studies raises issues that cannot be covered adequately in one volume (such as the cultural aspects of various non-Anglo-American regions, historical conditions before the fin de siècle and after the Second World War, the visual properties of film, etc.). I also focus primarily on six canonical novels, which have generally been considered both reflective of and influential on the period’s other fiction, although I pose these only as a starting point for future study. When selecting these works, however, I have strived for diversity in terms of the types of disabilities represented as well as for a variety of gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic perspectives.

Disability has long served fiction as “a master metaphor for social ills” (Mitchell 24), and critics have rightly begun to account for the prevalence of disabilities in these works by recognizing their symbolic value. David Trotter, for example, suggests that the “meaningless” of modern life “often takes the form of injury, because injury disturbs or negates the familiar shape human beings take” (77). Maren Linett also points to “The ‘inward turn’ of early twentieth-century literature” as a basis for “its fascination with blindness as a route to an exploration of consciousness and communion with a single other” (30). More generally, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder interpret “perversions of the body” as symbols for the alienation and fragmentation that characterize canonical modernism (Narrative Prosthesis 145). My own analysis is that these authors most often use disability as a “defect” that signals a general state of instability or particular type of social disorder. In some cases, the depiction is largely

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4 As Mao and Walkowitz explain, many scholars now find a modernist sensibility in literature produced around the world, earlier and later than the traditionally observed dates, and in various media formats.
metaphorical. For example, Conrad makes one character’s literal “idiocy” a barometer for the illogical behaviors of others, while Wright similarly uses one person’s literal blindness to highlight the refusal of both white and black Americans to recognize each other’s humanity. In most cases, however, the authors give multiple characters literal health “problems” and present them as a consequence of living in the modern world. In Hemingway’s and Woolf’s novels, these conditions result primarily from the devastation caused by World War I, while in Fitzgerald’s illness stems largely from decadence. Joyce proves an exception to this group, as he features characters with disabilities only sporadically in *Ulysses* and treats their conditions as personal flaws in line with the other characters’ generally antiheroic traits. Rather than portray disabilities as ordinary variations in health and body type, all of these authors depict their generation as somehow less than “normal,” reflecting a sensibility particular to their era. As Lennard J. Davis has documented, the concept of “normalcy” had arisen only in the mid-nineteenth century (24), as “part of a notion of progress, of industrialization, and of the ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie” (49). Replacing the sense of an “ideal body,” which “is not attainable by a human,” normalcy “implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm” (25, 29). With the concept of the norm, however, also comes “the concept of deviations or extremes,” making people with disabilities seem deviant (29).\(^5\) In my analysis, this concept of “normalcy” exists in modernist literature most often as a sort of abstract standard that multiple characters fall short of. Although Hemingway rejected Gertrude Stein’s claim that the generation was “lost,” he admitted they were “beat up”

\(^5\) Davis also argues that the novel form of literature replicates the concept of the norm from “the typicality of the central character, to the normalizing devices of plot to bring deviant characters back into the norms of society, to the normalizing coda of endings” (49). As my study will demonstrate, however, I find this trajectory to be untrue of most modernist literature.
(C. Baker 13), and the prevalence of disabilities in these works suggests most authors agreed. To evoke the perspective of modernists, I call the generation “defective.”

In addition to the prevalence of disabilities, I find that both the experimental styles of modernist writing and the authors’ own attitudes toward health affect their portrayals. The “inward turn” of modernism leads to depictions of illnesses and impairments from multiple subjective points of view, allowing authors to reveal both their characters’ personal experiences and the judgments of others. An experimental plot structure also leads Fitzgerald to sensationalize the condition of schizophrenia, while Wright’s incorporation of African American folklore makes blindness in its figurative sense both a cause and effect of racial violence. Authors’ own concerns and experiences also affect their portrayals, such as we find in Woolf’s criticism of healthcare and in Hemingway’s depiction of a personal relationship impeded by physical impairment.

Modernist fiction also differs from its predecessors in its narrative treatments. Mitchell finds that stories about disability tend to move from identifying this “abnormality” to eliminating or curing it; because “Disability cannot be accommodated in the ranks of the norm(als),” Mitchell suggests, this difference must be “left behind or punished for its lack of conformity” (23). In modernist works, however, one person’s health may either improve or decline, but most characters remain in a state of disability. Notably, this development contrasts directly with the era’s focus on rehabilitation and cure. Some characters do undergo treatment, such as Septimus Smith and Nicole Diver, and those efforts lead alternately to death or a near cure. In most cases, however, individuals with disabilities continue to engage actively in life. As examples, Jake Barnes works, travels, and pursues love even though he feels limited by his injury; Nicole Diver manages marriage and motherhood while battling schizophrenia; Gerty MacDowell attracts the
sexual attention she desires even though she walks with what her society considers an unattractive limp, and Mrs. Dalton heads a philanthropic enterprise and household while blind. These characters may suffer, but they do not transform into the crippled beggars and confined “madwomen” of the past.

In addition to rejecting the trend toward rehabilitation and cure, modernists also seem at odds with public opinion in other ways. Conrad, for example, assigns degenerationist traits to his characters only to then mock the popular theory. The public’s conception of disability as solely a medical issue rather than also a social one comes under attack as well. In particular, these writers often depict the prejudice that can turn “difference” into “disability,” such as we find in *Ulysses* when Leopold Bloom reacts with pity to the sight of Gerty’s limp even though the condition causes her neither pain nor a lack of mobility. Many in the field have also strived to replace the medical model of disability, which “defines disability as an individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being,” with a social one, which defines disability “as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the “defective” person but significant changes in the social and built environment” (Siebers 3). As critics such as Tobin Siebers and Susan Wendell have argued, however, neither model is sufficient; “Disability has social, experiential and biological components, present and recognized in different measures for different people” (Wendell 108). The novels’ representations of prejudice thus approach this interrelated view of disability, even as the public and medical professionals continued to treat disability as a personal “defect” that must be overcome for both individuals and societies to prosper.

That is not to say, however, that modernists always avoid stereotyping or that they demonstrate a post-civil rights’ sensibility of acceptance. Disabled characters may still function
in the traditional role of victim, are sometimes drawn unrealistically, and are often deemed objects of pity. More generally, to be disabled in modernist literature is still to be “defective”, but the balance has shifted to a recognition that few can now lay claim to the privileged status of “normalcy.”

Chapter Organization and Review of the Literature

My study begins with an analysis of Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, which serves as an early example of how modernists use disability to characterize the generation rather than to mark one individual as deviant. The character with the most obvious disability is Stevie, a young man whose “idiocy” was considered at the time to be an extreme form of degeneration. As each successive character demonstrates his or her own illogical behavior, however, Conrad quickly elides the difference between “idiocy” and “normalcy.” After reviewing the history of idiocy as a fictional trope, I explain the ways in which Conrad incorporates the traditions of the quixotic fool and fool as truth-teller, while updating that tradition by making other characters more quixotic than Stevie and by making Stevie’s truth-telling a matter of mortal rather than divine insight. I then discuss degeneration theory and argue that Conrad implies a general state of anarchy by creating a circle of “idiots” and other degenerates who act illogically and out of their own self-interest rather than in the service of the common good. In the final section of this chapter, I further point out how Conrad’s use of the grotesque illustrates the public bias against “abnormal” body types.

Several critics have discussed the novel’s depiction of Stevie, as well as its larger cast of degenerates and grotesques. Irving Howe considers Stevie a weak “literary cousin” of Dostoevsky’s Myshkin, suggesting that whereas “Dostoevsky’s idiot grazes the sublime,”
Conrad’s “never emerges from the pitiable” (3). Avrom Fleishman finds a broader theme of “madness” in the novel, describing The Secret Agent as “not merely an anticipation of the irrationalism of subversive activity in modern times, but a prophecy of the erection of madness into a governmental system” (208). Fleishman locates Stevie “in the tradition of the comic jester who is free to reveal the madness and corruption of society with impunity,” as well as labeling him a “quixotic” fool, “who is out of touch with the practical realities of the world but who reaches the heart of its moral condition by his awareness of its divergence from a lost ideal state” (203). Fleishman also points out Conrad’s use of thinness and fatness as symbols, noting the former’s association with moral energy, social commitment, and intellectual curiosity, and the latter’s with laziness, self-esteem, and complacency (204). Adding to this aspect of the discussion, Daniel R. Schwarz suggests that Stevie’s frailty in contrast to the “well-fed rotundity” of most of the other characters implies “a parasitic relationship in which [Stevie] is the host” (170). Elsa Nettels also addresses the “abnormal” bodies in The Secret Agent as part of Conrad’s general interest in the grotesque. Analyzing several of the author’s works, Nettels finds that “In most of these figures, the physical distortion and the diseased condition are the outward signs either of spiritual emptiness or of moral depravity” (147). Regarding The Secret Agent, Nettels describes the “physically monstrous figures, like Michaelis and Yundt,” as “absurd beyond Conrad’s other grotesques in their espousal of changes they are utterly powerless to effect” (157). Jan Gordon addresses Conrad’s use of the body as well, arguing that the author’s “interest in ideological deformation can only be represented as corporeal deformations” (218). Gordon finds this representation not only in Stevie’s condition, but also in “Verloc’s chronic narcolepsy, which turns night into day for him; Michaelis’s obesity, which renders him immobile without the physical assistance that renders him vulnerable to police surveillance; and Karl
Yundt’s gouty knees, which have deformed his walk and appearance” (218). Anupama Iyer compares Stevie to other fictional characters with intellectual disabilities, finding the depiction typical in that it associates eccentricity with spiritual gifts, casts Stevie as an Other through his distinctive mannerisms, uses “Stevie’s blind loyalty [as] a mirror to the corruption and inept plotting of the anarchists who set him up” (131), and portrays a “childlike innocence” that reflects on the character’s “being closer to nature than to man” (131-32). Similarly, Patrick McDonagh places Stevie in line with earlier portrayals of “idiots” in fiction, but he points out that Stevie’s function as “the moral centre of the novel” counters “prevailing discourses that constructed the ‘idiot’ as fundamentally lacking moral capacity” (313).

Other critics analyze the novel’s treatment of degeneration theory. Whereas William Greenslade calls the work “a devastating and brilliant demolition job” on degeneration ideology (115), Cedric Watts argues that Conrad “plays an elaborate game of ironic endorsement and mocking reversal” of Cesare Lombroso’s theories (Preface 92). Martin Halliwell similarly notes the reliance on Lombroso’s typology of characters but argues that Conrad challenges “the moralistic dimension of [Lombroso’s] work and his categorical distinctions” (101).

Building on this earlier work, I attempt a more thorough analysis of the novel’s portrayal of disability through Conrad’s use of idiocy, degeneracy, and the grotesque. Because this chapter documents the prevalence of disabilities in a single novel, I move in the following sections to a closer focus on the main characters and the particular aspects of modernism that affect these depictions, while still calling attention to the authors’ use of disability to characterize their generation as “defective.” In chapter 2, I consider how the modernists’ experiments in style shape their representations of disabilities by analyzing Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night. I find the “inward turn” of modernism particularly compelling in portraits of
mental illness, in which a person’s words and actions often seem confusing to others. In both works, the authors’ use of third-person observations enables them to address the various types of stigma that accompany mental illness, while their descriptions of a character’s thoughts, such as when hallucinating or hysterical, serve to clarify the causes of such behaviors as well as to convey how the individuals themselves experience those moments. Regarding *Mrs. Dalloway*, I discuss Woolf’s concern with presenting characters through their perceptions of the world around them, and I find that she initially distinguishes what she considers the “sane” conscious from the “insane” one by making the latter both hallucinatory and egocentric. Ultimately, though, Woolf presents a group of characters whose “symptoms” are all so similar that the line between sanity and insanity that she initially conceived becomes indistinct. Like Woolf, Fitzgerald uses multiple subjective points of view that illustrate the effects of mental illness on both individuals and their loved ones. Considered alongside *Mrs. Dalloway*, I find in *Tender* a somewhat similar concern with the individual consciousness, but I point out that, unlike Woolf who criticizes both the medical profession and public attitudes toward sickness, Fitzgerald aligns himself with the popular view that illness is a matter of intent; in *Tender* characters suffer ill health largely as a result of either their own or another’s decadent behavior. In analyzing the novel, I join other critics in noting how Fitzgerald’s romantic sensibility and personal experiences influence his depiction of his hero’s decline into alcoholism and depression, but I also point out how the author’s experiment with non-linear plot structure causes him to sensationalize Nicole’s schizophrenia, an aspect of the novel that earlier critics have neglected. Fitzgerald somewhat balances that sensationalism, however, with a subjective rendering of Nicole’s thoughts, which demonstrate her fortitude and desire to lead a productive life. The combination of her point of view with forthright descriptions of Dick’s flaws, particularly his
interest in young women, leads me to find Nicole a more sympathetic character and Dick a less sympathetic one than most critics do. I also call attention to Fitzgerald’s atypical portrait of a character learning to live with mental illness, as well as his focus on the difficulties that caretakers may experience.

Early reviewers had little to say about Woolf’s depiction of mental illness, although E. M. Forster briefly mentions Septimus, the character suffering from shell shock. Aligning himself with the medical attitudes of the day, Forster contends that Sir William Bradshaw “very properly” arranges for Septimus “to go to a lunatic asylum,” but that “Septimus is ungrateful and throws himself out of the window” (174-75). Later critics focused more on the novel’s social critiques. Alex Zwerdling interprets Woolf’s target as a ruling class that “uses its influence to exclude and sequester alien or threatening forces—the Septimus Smiths, the Doris Kilmans—and to protect itself from any sort of intense feeling” (72), while William Greenslade points to the medical profession, “which victimises Septimus” and functions as “the most damaging expression of that patriarchal structure of authority which degeneration has both shored up, and discursively perpetuated” (233). Whereas Greenslade addresses degeneration theory, Donald J. Childs analyzes Woolf’s attitude toward the related field of eugenics. Although Woolf criticizes certain characters who hold eugenicist views, Childs contends, “it is by no means clear that she criticizes eugenics itself” (38). Other critics point to the effects of World War I, such as George Panichas who describes the characters as “casualties of their time, physically and emotionally wounded, and badly paralyzed by the power of might that is beyond comprehension” (235). To Mark Spilka, however, the novel reflects the author’s own experience with grief and mental illness. Spilka praises Woolf’s depiction of Septimus’s condition, suggesting “it conveys with great fidelity the manic and depressive swings she knew firsthand” (“Mrs. Dalloway’s” 53). Yet
in Woolf’s creation of Septimus as a separate character from Clarissa, Spilka finds that the author avoids not only her main character’s suicide but also “her unworked grief, guilt, and anger over the death of some beloved person” (54). Such a focus on Clarissa leads other critics to address the character’s response to Septimus’s death. Deborah Guth argues that Clarissa’s reinterpretation of Septimus’s suicide serves as an “internal strategy of self-evasion” (36) while also causing her to ignore the young man’s “substantive reality”; “by reducing Septimus to a symbolic leap of defiance,” Guth contends, “Clarissa, no less than society, indulges in ritual sacrifice—the sacrifice of an individual reality in favor of the vision” (39). Similarly, Vereen M. Bell and Vereen Bell point out that Clarissa “opportunistically reevaluates the meaning of Septimus’s death” (109), but they also find her empathy with Septimus to form “her one moment of true moral insight” (95-96). In addition to assessing Clarissa’s character, some critics have called attention to Septimus’s personal traits beyond his illness. Meg Albrinck points out that Septimus’s “lack of physical strength, his sensitivity, and his romantic ideals” would have made him “the perfect target for recruiting posters that shamed unenlisted men into service” (55-56), while David Bradshaw notes that the medals Septimus received indicate that he “must have been a remarkably courageous soldier,” and thus “the treatment he receives at the hands of Bradshaw and Holmes seems all the more callous and unfitting” (xv). Bradshaw also points out the similarities between several characters, suggesting Woolf seems to be asking readers to determine “where clinical insanity begins and human idiosyncrasy ends” (xxiv).

Early reviewers seemed less sure of Tender is the Night, raising several points of debate that future critics would return to. Mary M. Colum, for example, notes the treatment of the “psychopathic personality,” but considers the work “a study of the disease rather than a study of that type of personality which may be subject to the disease” (59-60). Malcolm Cowley also
initially found the novel flawed. Asserting his oft-repeated comment that Fitzgerald seems to have a “dual personality,” both a “guest at the ball” and “a little boy peeping in through the window” (“Breakdown” 84), Cowley contends that “now that the ball is ending in tragedy, [Fitzgerald] doesn’t know how to describe it,” as “a purely psychological novel” or “from the detached view of a social historian” (85). In his introduction to the revised 1951 version, Cowley argues that the reordered chronology clarifies the psychological elements, and he praises Fitzgerald’s rendering of Dick Diver as a man “who has lost command of himself and deteriorates before our eyes” (“Introduction” 109). Charles R. Metzger’s book-length analysis furthers this interest in the novel’s psychopathic elements, testing its portrayal of “personality disorders” against “what we think we know about such disorders and their treatment or non-treatment in real life…” (ix).

A frequent point of debate has also been the unclear reasons for Dick’s decline and the question of Nicole’s role in her husband’s disintegration. William Troy, for example, asks, “Is it that once Nicole is cured of her disease she no longer has need of his kind of love? Is it that her money has acted like a virus to destroy his personality and with it his life-work? Or is it simply that he is a man of weak character. . . ?” (81-82). Most critics place the blame on Nicole, such as Michael March, who argues that “the octopus of Nicole’s weakness (her pathological past) and her strength (her fabulous wealth) fastens itself upon Richard Diver and drains him of all hope and aspiration” (640). In a similar vein, Eugene White finds Dick a sacrificial figure, who “chooses what is best for Nicole even though it brings heartbreak to him” (125), but White also notes that Fitzgerald humanizes his hero by making him weak and incomplete (131). William E. Doherty broadens this discussion to consider the aspects of Romanticism that influenced Fitzgerald. Doherty considers Dick a victim of “the Romantic deception,” symbolized by Nicole
as the nightingale of Keats’s “Ode,” and calls attention to the novel’s other such “victims,” also noting that Fitzgerald associates Romantic illusions with “drug and drink” (154).

Feminist critics largely disparage the novel’s treatment of women. Judith Fetterley, for example, argues that Tender “proposes that American men are driven ‘mad’ by the feminization of American culture which forces them to live out the lives of women and which purchases the sanity of women at men’s expense” (113-14). Diane Price Herndl similarly finds that Nicole’s recovery comes at Dick’s expense. Describing an economy in the novel based on “the service that one person can offer another” (206), Price Herndl argues that Nicole “exploits her husband for her own therapeutic ends” (209). She also considers Dick initially successful because “he is so intent on ‘curing’ other people,” but contends that “he fails in the long run because he is unable to maintain the detachment that they expect to accompany that kind of care”; Nicole, however, “thrives in such an economy” because she is “the archetypal consumer,” not of products but of services (208). Price Herndl further suggests that Nicole recovers because “consumption is health,” but that “Fitzgerald questions the price of that recovery and whether an invalid woman is worth it” (209).

Tom C. Coleman may have been the first critic to find Nicole at least a somewhat sympathetic character. Describing her as “a basically amoral young woman living in a basically immoral society,” Coleman insists that Nicole is an innocent victim of her environment (38-39). Sarah Beebe Fryer also finds the novel sympathetic to Nicole, arguing that the character “takes small but important steps toward her own personal freedom in a world dominated by men” (325). However, “Because [Nicole] continues to define herself in terms of her connections with men,” Fryer contends, “her self-esteem remains shaky: men can destroy or affirm her sense of self-worth almost at will” (325). More recently, Kirk Curnutt notes that Fitzgerald intended the novel
to be a “‘woman’s book,’ with a strong female perspective to compensate for Gatsby’s ‘purely masculine interest’” (77). Curnutt points out that the novel “gives voice to Nicole Diver’s internal thoughts and feelings” and depicts her as having been “doubly victimized by the men in her life—first by her father’s incestuous advances and then by Dick’s professional failure to maintain appropriate doctor/patient boundaries”; thus, to Curnutt, “she symbolizes the psychological damage wreaked by paternalism, which exploits young women under the guise of protecting them” (77-78).

My own analysis of these two works draws on such critical concerns, but my focus on style leads me to conclude that the modernist’ turn toward subjective points of view offers a more comprehensive portrait of disability than traditional third-person omniscience could provide. However, I also point to what I see as flaws in the authors’ tendencies to relegate one person’s disability to the service of another character’s development. The difficulties in marriage that illness provokes in both novels also raise the issue of how modernists treat disability in regard to personal relationships. I discuss this issue in chapter 3, addressing what Mark Spilka has called “one of the most persistent themes of the twenties,” the “death of love in World War I” (“Death of Love” 25). The relation of disability to this theme proves contradictory, as some authors continue stereotyping disabled persons as either asexual or sexually deviant, some depict illness or impairment as a barrier to romance, and still others portray their disabled characters as both sexually attractive and successful in pursuing love. I use Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises and Joyce’s Ulysses to illustrate these contradictions; however, I challenge the critical consensus that Hemingway’s Jake Barnes feels emasculated and that Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell cannot find love because of her limp. In my view, Jake’s disability is a physical, not a psychological one,
which both author and character perceive as prohibitive to romance. In contrast, Joyce makes Gerty successful in attracting the sexual attention she desires.

In contrast to most critics, I argue that Jake maintains his sense of masculinity, that his conception of gender aligns with the era’s hegemonic ideals, and that Hemingway explicitly sets Jake in opposition to Robert Cohn, who serves as the novel’s example of inappropriate masculine behavior. To combat the critical consensus that a man with Jake’s disability must feel emasculated, I compare his comments and behaviors to those of real men who retained or regained their sense of masculinity after incurring similar types of disabilities. That is not to say, however, that Jake’s injury is not disabling. The physical nature of his wound leaves him unable to satisfy the woman he loves, and Hemingway thus treats the disability as an obstacle that Jake cannot overcome.

In analyzing the “Nausicaa” chapter of Ulysses, I also challenge the critical consensus that Gerty MacDowell’s limp makes her pitiable and “doomed” to spinsterhood. Pointing to the variety of iconic images of female beauty that go into the creation of Gerty, I argue that Joyce gives his character a limp in order to disrupt such idealizations. By making her imperfect, Joyce aligns her with the other characters in the novel who are flawed but, nevertheless, heroic in the modern sense. In my view, Gerty recognizes that her limp poses an obstacle to her efforts to attract a husband, but not a prohibitive one, and she remains confident in her ability to adhere to her culture’s standards of feminine beauty. I also point out that, by posing for Bloom, Gerty aligns herself with the women in both popular advertising and more covert forums who boldly asserted their sexuality and controlled its display, and that her encounter with Bloom allows her to experience both the male desire she craves as well as her own sexual fulfillment.
Regarding Hemingway’s novel, early reviewers mostly discussed the author’s inventive prose style or the characters’ lifestyles and real-life antecedents. Philip Young, however, set the tone for the majority of later critics in positioning Jake Barnes as the emasculated version of Hemingway’s many wounded heroes. Following this sense that Jake’s wound was primarily a psychological one, Mark Spilka originally described Jake’s condition as a reflection of the “emotional impotence” of all of the characters, whom Spilka calls “a parade of sexual cripples” (“The Death of Love” 26). In a later examination of the influence of Hemingway’s “androgynous” upbringing on the author’s fiction, Spilka suggests that “Brett is the woman Jake would in some sense like to be” (Hemingway’s Quarrel with Androgyny 204). Continuing this comparison of Jake’s masculinity to the hegemonic standards of his day, Carole Gottlieb Vopat relates the wound to the character’s inability “to take charge, to control and master, to live with that courage, dominance, independence and stamina which for Hemingway is the essence of masculinity” (93). Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes also suggest that Jake’s wound has “unmanned him,” putting him “in the passive feminine position of lack” (44), while Thomas Strychacz argues that Jake “exemplifies the condition of manhood,” which is, however, a “general economy of lack, facing all men” (80). Other critics contend that Jake compensates for his sense of emasculation, such as Turgay Bayindir, who suggests that Jake “has to perform activities assigned to a ‘masculine’ signifier in order to make up for what he physically lacks” (141), and Jacob Michael Leland, who finds that, “Because the war has compromised his ability to perform sexually, Jake recovers that power and agency on economic terms” (42).

In contrast to those who discuss masculinity in its hegemonic form, some critics argue that the novel treats gender as a more fluid construct. Among these, Debra Moddelmog argues that the text “brings traditional significations of gender and sexuality into conflict” (192), and
Richard Fantina suggests the work “implicitly condemns contemporary Western standards of manhood,” while projecting “a self-conscious vision of a restructured male subjectivity,” one that would “elevate the more sensitive qualities of Jake Barnes, and combine them with the solitary, heroic qualities that Hemingway invests in the matador, Pedro Romero” (87).

A few critics have incorporated the concerns of Disability Studies into their analyses. To Dana Fore, “Jake occupies a psychological middle-ground between the disabled characters Count Mippipopolous and the bullfighter Belmonte—and as he accepts or rejects these characters, we are meant to understand that he is embracing or discarding the stereotypes of able-bodiedness or disability they represent” (76). Noting Hemingway’s personal experience with disability, Mitchell and Snyder form a different analysis than most critics, pointing out that the novel “deviates from the prototypical modernist equation of disability with social collapse,” and provides instead “a full-fledged disability critique of contemporary society when his protagonist openly refuses to ‘work up’ his disability into a metaphor for the lost generation at the suggestion of his fishing buddy” (*Narrative Prosthesis* 165).

For most critics, however, Jake’s disability defines both his sense of masculinity and his ability to pursue romance. Critics of Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell offer similar analyses. Suzette Henke was one of the first to analyze Gerty in depth, and she initially found the character a sympathetic one, contending that “Once we learn of Gerty’s lameness, we have to admire the bravado of her self-assertion in the competitive sexual market of 1904” (“Romantic Fantasy” 155). But Henke later revised her analysis to describe Gerty’s function as “a mirror, a *tabula rasa* or blank screen for the inscription of male masturbatory titillation” (“Joyce’s Naughty Nausicca” 87). Noting that Oedipus was “club-footed,” Henke also positions Gerty as “a female Oedipus, [who] seeks the father figure who will heal her wounded spirit by erasing the traces of
limping inadequacy” (89). Others who trace the novel’s allusions include Kimberly Devlin, who considers Gerty an “ironic contrast” to the virtuous heroine of Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (“Romance” 383), and Vike Martina Plock who argues that Joyce uses the character to parody and criticize Irish nationalist icons, particularly W. B. Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan. To Plock, Gerty’s limp functions as “the reversal of the proud walk that so conspicuously distinguished Yeats’s female nationalist symbol” (119). Continuing such unsympathetic readings, Deborah Kent points to Gerty’s jealousy toward her non-disabled friends, her desire for romance, Leopold’s Bloom’s reaction to her, and Joyce’s overall characterization as evidence that Gerty’s lameness “renders her a mocking travesty of all that is feminine” (60), while Lesley Higgins describes Gerty more tersely as “an idol with damaged feet” (56).

Several critics also address the consumer culture depicted in the chapter, such as Garry Martin Leonard,⁶ who argues that Gerty “advertises and packages her sexuality as a complex masquerade of femininity designed to attract a male consumer” (99). To Leonard, Gerty’s limp thus makes her “a damaged product” (102), while Michael O. Jauchen suggests that Bloom’s thoughts about Gerty give her “physical defect a type of strange marketability as a sexual curiosity” (91). Noting Gerty’s working-class background, lack of employment skills, dysfunctional family, and slim prospects for marriage, Jauchen also proposes that Gerty is likely to become a prostitute.

Other critics perceive Gerty’s voice as a resistant one to the larger narrative. For example, Jen Shelton argues that “within a discourse rigorously managed and controlled by a master narrative of normative cultural rules for Irish women,” Gerty and Cissy “possess resistant voices through which Joyce establishes a narrative economy valuing disorder and disobedience” (87). Similarly, Heather Cook Callow suggests that Joyce’s use of female voices in *Ulysses* may be

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⁶ See also Henke, Osteen, and Richards.
seen as part of a process “in which confidence-inspiring male voices encourage us as readers to adopt a view that female voices later call into question, a process wherein patriarchal authority is thereby undermined” (152). Relating Gerty’s limp to her discourse, Callow interprets the disability as a symbol of “her handicap as a product and a wielder of socially approved ‘feminine’ discourse” and of the surprise readers get when we discover that her “handicapped ‘feminine’ discourse” was “right” (157). Focusing on Gerty’s behavior rather than speech, Philip Sicker contends that she is not merely a passive object, but that she achieves her own sexual satisfaction while posing for Bloom and acts as both “mastering spectacle and gazing subject” (“Unveiling” 102). Sicker also draws on Laura Mulvey’s argument that women are objectified in film for male pleasure and empowerment, and asserts that “Gerty does not feel objectified or controlled by the male gaze, but empowered and aroused by her sense of visual mastery” (106). In the most extensive analysis of Gerty as a disabled woman, Angela Lea Nemecek argues that Gerty “embodies a powerful resistance to eugenic ideologies of standardization that pervade the twentieth century, positing in their place an ethics of bodily particularity” (173).

Although I argue that Gerty fully adopts her culture’s able-bodied standards of feminine beauty, I find that Joyce nevertheless portrays a disabled woman as sexually attractive in contrast to his culture’s idealized standards. Indeed, despite their differences, both novels override the stereotypes of much fiction by presenting their disabled characters as sexually desirable.

From discussions of personal relationships and mainstream modernism, I move in the final chapter to social relations and the particularities of African American modernism with an analysis of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. In the story of an African-American man who rebels against white oppression, Wright employs blindness as a metaphor for the causes and effects of interracial conflict. To analyze this trope, I point out how Wright updates the conventional
association of blindness with a lack of insight to make the condition an intentional refusal of one racial group to recognize another’s humanity. I then argue that Wright merges this metaphor with three aspects of African American folklore: the presence of ghosts, which makes the literally blind character Mrs. Dalton both a revenant of the country’s colonists and a symbol of continuing oppression; the cunning and disguise of the trickster, which appears in Bigger’s attempts to exploit the blindness of others; and the cruelty and bravado of the badman, which forms Bigger’s final identity as he rebels against the system that oppresses him. Although I find the novel’s depiction of literal blindness to be a stereotypical one, I also note that Wright’s projection of disability onto the white oppressor contrasts with the more widely used trope of invisibility that casts blacks as the “defective” race.

Much of the criticism on *Native Son* has focused on its status as a protest novel, or, more accurately, a case of “writing back, a gesture involving more parity than does the asymmetrical power relation implicit in the very notion of protest” (Ward 173). Critics have also addressed Wright’s blunt portrayal of African-American violence, and his use of “naturalism as a deterministic vision of life, one that claimed human behavior was shaped by massive environmental forces such as heredity, biological necessity, social conditioning, and economic pressure” (R. Butler 29). Some critics have related this sense of a deterministic environment to the novel’s metaphor of blindness. For instance, Robert Butler describes the characters as “blinded by environmental conditioning and emotional intensity” (43), while Karl Precoda and P. S. Polanah argue that “the problems of reading and misreading, of blindness and insight, become the determinants of Bigger’s actions” (33). Incorporating the concept of the gaze into this discussion, Becca Gercken similarly concludes that Bigger’s actions are the product of a determinist environment. Comparing *Native Son* to *The Outsider*, Gercken argues that “The
desires, and thus the agency of Bigger and Damon are limited by a gaze that keeps them subjectified; the panopticism of the dominant culture situates them as objects, not agents; observed, not observers; passive, not active” (633).

Other critics focus more specifically on the metaphor of blindness and the character of Mrs. Dalton. James Nagel, for instance, calls *Native Son* “an analysis of ‘perception’ which documents the effect prejudice, alienation, oppression, and isolation have on one’s ability to ‘see’ and ‘be seen’ clearly” (109). Linking this metaphor to that of invisibility, Todd M. Lieber argues that Bigger’s invisibility results in the character having “neither a sense of self nor a firm relationship with any other human being,” in addition to bearing his own “reciprocal blindness”; that is, Lieber suggests, Bigger is unable “to comprehend the forces which, paradoxically, both deny him and insist on defining him” (89).

Although Bigger declares himself blind in the figurative sense, Mrs. Dalton is the only character who literally cannot see, and most critics recognize her condition as “symbolic of the blindness of the white liberal philanthropic community” (Margolies 42). Along this line, Jonathan Elmer points out that “Mrs. Dalton’s liberalism and blindness “go hand in hand,” for “Even as she exempts herself from the coercive visual economy regimenting race relations, she supports and makes possible that system” (788). An alternative view of Mrs. Dalton’s blindness comes from Alan W. France, who argues that the novel portrays “The woman, as displaced Other, […] characterized as blind and weak” (416). Analyzing the novel from the perspective of Disability Studies, Michael Bérubé points out that “*Native Son* deploys disability so as to render it a moral failing and manages, in so doing, to ignore the material detail of the disability itself” (569). As Bérubé suggests, “it may be crucial to the plot that Mrs. Dalton was not able to see
Bigger in Mary’s room that night, but once Mrs. Dalton has performed her function in the plot, her blindness is important to *Native Son* only in a metaphorical sense” (569).

In addition to the discourse on blindness, some critics have addressed Wright’s incorporation of the trickster and badman characters of African American folklore. Houston A. Baker describes Bigger as “a conscious literary projection of the folk hero who embodies the survival values of a culture,” noting that his character combines the traditions of “the trickster animal who overcomes his stronger opponents, of John, the slave who outwits his master, [and] of the ‘bad nigger’ (Shine, Stackolee, Dupree) who rebels against an oppressive system” (133). In a longer study of the evolution of the badman type, Jerry H. Bryant finds that Wright updates the character by having Bigger explicitly demonstrate “the rage against whites previous badmen were said to have expressed in their own violence against black competitors” (65). More significantly, Bryant points out that “the fulfillment which [Bigger] finally, vividly feels no predecessor ever experienced in quite the same way. For the bourgeois world, his acts are unforgivably criminal. For Bigger they are an awakening” (65).

Although Wright poses blindness as a historical condition dating to the country’s founders, he joins other authors in making disability a primary trait of his generation. As Hemingway’s Georgette suggests, “Everybody’s sick” in one form or another, but my study is the first to analyze the full implications of this pronouncement. To the common assessments of modernist characters as alienated and fragmented, then, I add the suggestion that they are also “defective,” from the authors’ perspectives, and that modernists routinely use disabilities to depict their generation as damaged physically and psychically by their societies, their own decadence, or the turbulence of modernity. In relocating disability from the individual to the group, in presenting the interior consciousness of the disabled character, and in updating
traditional metaphors and somewhat deviating from historical stereotypes, modernists continue to “make it new” in their portrayals of disability. As I discuss in my concluding chapter, however, the negative images they create would still contribute to the public’s perception of people with disabilities as inferior and deserving of pity. It would take the Nazi Holocaust, the advent of postmodernism, the civil rights’ movement, and the development of Disability Studies to create real change in such attitudes, but my hope is that works such this one can contribute to that change.
Chapter One:

Idiots and Other Degenerates: Disability at the Dawn of Modernism

One of the earliest novels to reflect a modernist approach to disability is Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907). In some ways, the depiction remains traditional in that disability serves its typical role as “a master metaphor for social ills” (Mitchell 24) and in the reliance on some stereotypes. Conrad moves beyond those conventions, however, to disrupt the ways in which the disabled body has been routinely portrayed as “an absolute state of otherness that is opposed to a standard, normative body” (Snyder et. al. 2). In this novel, Conrad both situates the character Stevie as a “defective” Other by which “normalcy” seems established, and then characterizes normalcy itself, or what has become “normal” in modern urban society, as “defective” in relation to some ambiguous standard held only by the narrator. The novel also destabilizes the perception of disability as merely a medical condition; Stevie and other characters are “disabled” not solely by certain physical or mental traits, but also through their social interactions. *The Secret Agent* is not fully characteristic of modernist portrayals of disability, however, as Conrad does not convey the interior consciousness of the disabled figure that we will see in later works.

The novel presents the story of Adolf Verloc, a secret agent working in London for an unspecified foreign government (presumably Russia). By also running a small shop that sells pornography and anarchist tracts, Verloc keeps his work secret from both the public and his family, which includes his wife, Winnie, her mother, and her younger brother, Stevie. The novel is set in the late nineteenth century\(^7\) when anarchists had been active throughout Europe, and

\(^7\) The date has been debated, but Cedric Watts convincingly argues for the year 1886 (“Jews” n.p.)
Verloc’s job has been to infiltrate such a group. Because his embassy believes the British government has been lax in policing the anarchists, its new Secretary, Vladimir, tries to provoke public outrage by ordering his agent to set off a bomb. Verloc employs his brother-in-law to handle the task, but Stevie trips while carrying the bomb and is killed. The novel comes to a close when Winnie responds by both murdering her husband and eventually committing suicide. The other main characters include the anarchists (Comrade Ossipon, Karl Yundt, Michaelis, and the Professor), and the police (Chief Inspector Heat and his superior, the Assistant Commissioner).

Stevie’s death highlights the anarchical nature of the society that Conrad depicts, as well as the ways in which disability serves this larger theme. Although Stevie sincerely wants to provoke social change, his “idiocy” makes him ignorant of Verloc’s self-serving motives. Like most of the characters, Verloc ironically claims to be working for the common good while acting instead in his own self-interest. He considers his “vocation” to be a “protector of society” (12), but he undermines his embassy to make himself valuable to the local police, and he manipulates Stevie into carrying the bomb only to save his own career. Both anarchists and government officials behave similarly. The anarchists rant against capitalism but argue over aims and methods while living off the women who support them. Only the Professor takes any real action, as he makes bombs for anyone who asks, including the one that kills Stevie. The police maintain surveillance of the anarchists, but Inspector Heat tries to maintain his own reputation by

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8 Critics generally accept Conrad’s contention that he “had no idea to consider anarchism politically—or to treat it seriously in its philosophical aspect: as a manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility” (Marcus xxx). David Mulry, however, argues that Conrad does use anarchy to make a political statement. Mulry points out that Stevie and Winnie ultimately fulfill the “shift from propaganda by word to propaganda by deed” called for by real anarchist Michael Bakunin in the 1870s (4-5). Mulry contends that “the ruthlessness of the politicians, the complacency of the upper classes, the complicity of the police, [and] the very unfolding of the plot itself reinforces the anarchist vision of the world rather than attempting to debunk or discredit it,” and that Winnie’s murder of Verloc further serves “to arouse the observers to revolution by example” (11).
protecting his informant Verloc and placing the blame for the bombing on Michaelis. In turn, the Assistant Commissioner wants to protect Michaelis only to preserve his friendship with the anarchist’s patroness, and he pursues Vladimir mainly out of revenge for the latter’s complaints about his police. All regard their own opinions as superior to others’, fail to recognize their own flaws, and use others for their own gain. As Avrom Fleishman suggests, *The Secret Agent* “is a novel about social anarchy. It is a dramatic portrayal of the sociological concept of ‘anomie’—radical disorder in the social structure and consequent personal dislocation” (212). John Hagan, Jr., also accurately states that the anarchy is “a moral condition” (158): “The entire universe of moral values is falling apart; the world of *The Secret Agent*, from top to bottom, from the official spheres to the domestic to the underground ranks of conspirators, is one of profound moral dislocation and anarchy” (162). Conrad both derides such disorder and conveys pity for his characters, as each ultimately lead “deluded, helpless, lonely, and futile lives” (Hagan 162).

Fleishman may be correct that the novel implicitly proposes “the value of human community” (212), but the characters’ egocentrism and corruption offer little basis for such alliance. Furthermore, those who do act unselfishly, such as Stevie in carrying the bomb and Winnie in trying to protect her brother, ultimately fail because of their own flawed natures. Humanity seems too “defective” to better itself.

Disability, therefore, functions as a metaphor for, and cause and effect of, a society that has lapsed into anarchy. Conrad uses Stevie’s literal “idiocy” as a facetious explanation for the others’ behaviors by having the characters frequently refer to each other as “idiots” or “imbeciles” while ignoring their own illogical behavior. The result, as Martin Halliwell describes, is “a city containing a variety of moral and neurological idiots” (98). Fleishman’s description that “The entire society comes to be seen as a jungle of animal forms obeying the
laws of predatory survival” (201) is also accurate. Idiocy was widely considered to be an extreme form of degeneration, and most characters possess degenerative traits. In some cases, Conrad further exaggerates the characters’ physical conditions to the point that they become grotesques, and such portrayals highlight the ways in which disability is socially constructed.

**Stevie and the Trope of Idiocy**

The most obvious character with a disability is Stevie, a young man variously described as “peculiar” (39), “half-witted” (174), and an “idjut” (198). Based on the contemporary terminology, people like Stevie would have been generally thought of as “idiots,” indicating persons with a condition we would now label as an intellectual or a developmental disability, or possibly autism.  

I will be using the word *idiot*, along with its synonyms and derivatives, for several reasons. First, as Patrick McDonagh points out, today’s terms are not historically accurate. In Conrad’s time, the designation of idiot served to define both an ambiguously diagnosed condition and the person’s essential identity; that is, in addition to having an ill-defined condition known as idiocy, the person was regarded merely as an idiot. In common usage, the word was also an umbrella term that included not only “idiots” (those considered the most “defective”), but also “imbeciles” and the merely “feeble-minded.” A distinction between “idiocy” and “lunacy” (or “madness”) had long been established, but those labels continued to

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9 G. Patrick Farrell suggests that Stevie’s symptoms are characteristic of autism (441), but I find Conrad more interested in the metaphorical value of idiocy than in depicting a specific condition.

10 As McDonagh suggests, “We have no way of knowing for certain if someone called a ‘fool’ in the sixteenth century would, if transported through time, be called ‘simple’ in the eighteenth century, an ‘imbecile’ in the 1890s, or ‘moderately or mildly retarded’ in the 1960s; nor do we know if someone called an ‘idiot’ in 1760 would still be one in 1860, or ‘severely retarded’ in 1960. Even in their own days, these terms signified a remarkably wide range of characteristics” (6).
overlap as well.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, the pejorative connotation of such words that today’s readers notice is essentially the same as it was when the novel was published \textsuperscript{12} and is the meaning that Conrad employs most often. By exploiting the imprecise and flexible nature of language, Conrad connects Stevie’s mental state to a broad range of physiological conditions and idiosyncratic behaviors. The overall effect is that Stevie’s idiocy becomes a symbol for the human condition in general, and also that Stevie ultimately seems less idiotic than some; indeed, as Inspector Heat eventually tells Verloc, “[Stevie] may’ve been half-witted, but you must have been crazy” (174).

The specific origins for Conrad’s use of idiocy appear both in his encounter with some children in France and in a conversation with Ford Madox Ford. The French family led Conrad to write a short story entitled “The Idiots” (1898), which contains some basic elements that would appear only somewhat changed in \textit{The Secret Agent}: the idiots as products of degeneration, a father ashamed of and enraged by his idiot children, and a wife who ends up killing her husband and herself. In the preface to \textit{The Secret Agent}, Conrad acknowledges the conversation with Ford as the inspiration for the novel.\textsuperscript{13} As the two were discussing a bombing that took place at the Greenwich Observatory, Conrad reports feeling that “it was impossible to fathom [the bombing’s] origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought . . . so

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\footnote{For example, Britain’s Lunacy Act of 1890 continued to define “lunatic” as “an idiot or a person of unsound mind” (\textit{Report} 156). Several attempts had been made by this point to distinguish between “idiocy,” “imbecility,” and “feeble-mindedness.” In 1908, the year after \textit{The Secret Agent} was published, the \textit{Report of the Royal Commission on Feeble-Mindedness} recommended categories of individuals with various mental conditions, ranging from “Persons of unsound mind” (or “lunatics,” “owing to disorder of the mind”), to “Persons mentally infirm” (arising from age or decay of the faculties), “Idiots” (the most “deeply defective”), “Imbeciles,” and “Feeble-minded.” Stevie more closely fits the category “Imbeciles,” which designates “persons who are capable of guarding themselves against common physical dangers, but who are incapable of earning their own living by reason of mental defect existing from birth or from an early age” (323-25). The \textit{Report} also includes categories for “Moral imbeciles,” as well as “Epileptics,” “Inebriates,” and “Deaf and dumb or blind” who are also “mentally defective.”}
\footnote{The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} provides a colloquial definition of “idiot” dating to the fifteenth century to designate “A person who speaks or acts in what the speaker considers an irrational way, or with extreme stupidity or foolishness” (“Idiot”).}
\footnote{In the “Author’s Note,” Conrad refers only to a “friend,” but Ford has commented on the conversation as well (Watt 16).}
\end{footnotes}
that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other” ("Author’s Note" 5). Ford’s response, “Oh, that fellow was half an idiot” (5), surfaces in Stevie’s character. The historical incident involved Martial Bourdin, whom at least one London anarchist described as “a bit of a simpleton” (Sherry 314). Ian Watt, however, contends that “There is no other evidence that Bourdin was ‘half an idiot’” (117), and thus “Ford seems to be responsible for making Bourdin and therefore Stevie a half-wit” (122). Whatever Bourdin’s real mental capabilities, Conrad seems to have associated his own perception of the illogical nature of the event with Ford’s comment, added his rather pessimistic view of human nature and earlier thoughts about the French children, and decided to make idiocy a sort of general state of affairs.

Idiots have a long literary history, dating at least to Biblical times and appearing under such names as fools, folly, simpletons, etc. By the nineteenth century, these terms are replaced by “idiot,” and the character’s innocence (both naïveté and guiltlessness) serves the novels’ social and moral critiques (McDonagh 153). Hilary Dickinson points out that, traditionally, “authors were interested in the abstract concept of idiocy rather than in the lives of people who had this condition,” but, from the mid-nineteenth century on, metaphorical meanings are often entwined with “an interest in examining the effects of a disease or bodily condition in a naturalistic manner” (294-95). In The Secret Agent Conrad follows this more recent tradition by describing Stevie’s condition in some detail yet still using the character’s impairment metaphorically.

The novel portrays Stevie as a young man with a fairly childlike mentality, impaired speech, and a drooping lower lip. Stevie can read and write,¹⁴ and is capable of managing the few

¹⁴ Britain’s 1870 Education Act provided elementary school education for all children, and the Elementary Education Defective and Epileptic Children Act of 1899 set up schools for special education needs (McDonagh 300,
customers that shop at the family’s store. When speaking, he uses simple words and has difficulty forming full sentences. When distraught, he expresses himself by “shouting and stamping” (55), and when away from home alone, tends to forget his name and address. Stevie spends most of his time helping his sister with household chores or sitting quietly drawing circles. As with most of the characters, Stevie has a particular identifying trait, in this case, an acute sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others.

In creating the character, Conrad draws on a number of stereotypes related to idiocy, which he then often uses to elide the differences between Stevie and the others. Stevie exists in the novel primarily as a victim, a role intended to provoke readers’ pity and one that characters with disabilities frequently play. In a study of Victorian fiction, for example, Martha Stoddard Holmes finds that male characters with disabilities often appear in the form of the “innocent afflicted child,” who “unquestionably deserves pity, tenderness, and financial support” (95). Anapuma Iyer also notes that idiots, in particular, are often portrayed as “passive victims of exploitation” (131). Both of these descriptions apply to Stevie. Unlike most of the characters who act deceitfully and out of self-interest, Stevie draws our sympathy by showing concern for others and by being cruelly manipulated by his supposed guardian, Verloc.

The novel also presents Stevie’s life as one of repeated maltreatment. As a child, Stevie is physically abused by a father whose “humiliation at having such a very peculiar boy for a son manifested itself by a propensity to brutal treatment” (39). More specifically, Stevie “knew very

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15 Verloc trusts Stevie to manage the store only because “there was very little business at any time. . . . And, moreover, his wife was in charge of his brother-in-law” (10). This concern over Stevie’s ability to handle money reflects a stereotypical attitude toward men with intellectual disabilities that dates at least to the thirteenth century (McDonagh 82). In real life at the time Conrad was writing the novel, one report indicated that “these feeble-minded grown-ups, at eighteen or nineteen, could really do as good work as an ordinary average person of the servant class ‘under supervision’; but for other reasons one could not risk it” (Report 255 par. 75).
well that hot iron applied to one’s skin hurt very much” (47). Iyer also points out that characters with intellectual disabilities “are often the butt of ridicule and casual cruelty” (131), as is Stevie. When he works as an office boy, Stevie’s co-workers provoke him into setting off fireworks by “work[ing] upon his feelings by tales of injustice and oppression” (15), and, when he is at home, the charwoman cons money out of the gullible young man by complaining about her poverty. The most extreme act of exploitation occurs under his supposed protector, Verloc, when he employs Stevie to carry the bomb, and the resulting violent death thus ends a lifetime marked largely by abuse.

Stevie is not the novel’s ultimate victim, however, even though that role typically falls on a character with a disability. Although the narrator provokes pity and horror for Stevie’s fate by describing his disintegrated body as “what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast” (77), Stevie’s death occurs outside the text, and the description of his remains is brief. In terms of eliciting readers’ sympathy, those few paragraphs pale in comparison to the two chapters that Conrad spends detailing each of the moments that follow Winnie’s mounting despair. As I will demonstrate, this relocation of the role of primary victim onto Winnie is only one of the ways in which Stevie becomes less distinct from the other characters.

Conrad also incorporates the tradition of the quixotic fool, based on Cervantes’s character Don Quixote. As he did with the role of victim, Conrad displaces this stereotypical position from Stevie onto, in this case, several other characters. The Assistant Commissioner of police looks “like the vision of a cool, reflective Don Quixote, with the sunken eyes of a dark enthusiast and a very deliberate manner” (123). He even considers the bombing “a providentially given start-point for a crusade” (182), which is “the clearing out of this country of all the foreign political spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs” (186). In keeping with the novel’s constant

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16 See Cedric Watts for Conrad’s use of the quixotic fool in other works (Preface 67-74).
contradictions, though, the Assistant Commissioner may not be as quixotic as he seems.

Anarchists were a legitimate threat to the British government, and the Commissioner is correct in realizing that the blame for the bombing ultimately rests in Verloc’s embassy. The actions of other characters do seem quixotic, however, such as the bombing plan itself, Michaelis’s desire to transform the world into a hospital in which “the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak” (244), and, more significantly, Winnie’s futile attempt to protect her brother.

Whether or not Stevie’s own actions appear quixotic is debatable. Fleishman contends that Stevie is a quixotic fool, “who is out of touch with the practical realities of the world but who reaches the heart of its moral condition” (196). In Fleishman’s analysis, “Quixotism comes to be equivalent to a clear-sighted view of reality,” although he calls Stevie’s a “naïve realism” (196). In my view, Stevie is not a deluded idealist chasing windmills, but a co-victim trying to ease the pain of those around him. He is well aware of the reality of suffering since he encounters it from his father’s abuse, hears reports of it from his co-workers, and witnesses it in the plights of the charwoman and cabdriver. By setting off fireworks, giving Mrs. Neale money, and jumping off the cab to relieve the frail horse, Stevie is performing acts intended to relieve someone’s misery. Of those incidents, only the fireworks seem illogical.

The encounter with the cabdriver evokes the conventions of both quixotic fool and fool as truth-teller. When Stevie notices a cabbie whipping his frail horse, he initially feels concern for the animal and jumps off the carriage to relieve its burden. But as the cabdriver describes the

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17 Iyer interprets this scene as a stereotypical representation in which the rapport that intellectually disabled characters have with animals “reflects on their being closer to nature than to man” (131-32). This view would also align with the novel’s use of animal imagery to suggest atavism; however, Norman Sherry points to a more likely explanation in Conrad’s personal life. While his wife was having an operation, the author went for a walk and “found himself . . . standing in front of an old dray-horse with his arms literally round the animal’s neck”; realizing he seemed “hopelessly mad or merely intoxicated,” Conrad left the carter some money to feed the horse (364-66).
long hours he must work to provide for his wife and four children, Stevie quickly grasps the complexity of the situation: “the poor cabman [is] beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids at home” (143). At one point, Stevie has the desire to take both the cabbie and horse to bed with him, an idea that certainly seems quixotic but is in fact a sensibility that arises from the way Winnie had comforted him as a child. The narrator even points out that Stevie knows the idea is impossible because he “was not mad” and “is reasonable” (140). Stevie’s thoughts then progress logically. He considers that the police are the ones to handle the problem, but is then dissuaded by his sister’s insistence that “The police aren’t for that” (144). Winnie’s full response, “Don’t you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn’t take anything away from them who have” (144), points to a social system designed to protect the interests of the rich. Her brother’s suggestion thus seems naïve and quixotic, making his next step, turning to anarchy by accepting Verloc’s bombing plan, appear logical. Moreover, the plan is presented to him by a man he has been taught to trust completely and was invented by the head of a foreign embassy. If Stevie is a fool, then so are Verloc and Vladimir.

The role of fool as truth-teller arises when Stevie’s distress over the cabman’s plight leads him to declare that it is a “Bad world for poor people” (143). McDonagh explains the origins of this truth-teller trope in medieval literature, noting the development of a tradition of “a divinely inspired folly which unwittingly reveals truths” (135). As an example, he quotes the character Folly from Erasmus’s Praise of Folly (1511), who comments that “idiots, fools, nitwits, [and] simpletons” are “the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth, . . . but this is something the gods have granted only to fools” (qtd. in McDonagh 128). Indeed, Stevie is “frank and as open as the day himself” (144), although his insight does not stem from divine inspiration

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but from the reality he witnesses. The novel thus inverts the role of quixotic fool, relocating it from the idiot Stevie to his supposed intellectual superiors, and also updates his position as truth-teller to one that is grounded in mortal existence.

Stevie’s caregivers also fill stereotypical roles in terms of disability representations. As Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein point out,

One of the most compelling myths of the caregiver is the dichotomy of patron saint and torturer, which revolves around the embodiment of necessary virtue, good intentions, pity, and protection, on the one hand, and judgment, abuse, and wrong intent, on the other. (14)

As dual “patron saints,” both Winnie and her mother sacrifice their own happiness for Stevie’s welfare. While still a child herself, Winnie intervenes to protect her younger brother from their father’s violence, a protection that includes “blows intercepted (often with her own head)” (198). As an adult, Winnie turns down marriage to the man she loves in preference for Verloc, solely because she believes he will provide a safe haven for her brother. She considers the “tenor of her life” to have been concerned “mostly with Stevie’s difficult existence from its earliest days” (197) and her marriage a matter of “seven years’ security for Stevie, loyally paid for on her part” (198). More than any other character, Winnie views Stevie not merely as an idiot but as an individual, although her opinion is clearly an indiscriminate one: “She saw him amiable, attractive, affectionate, and only a little, a very little, peculiar” (145). Nevertheless, although Winnie’s intentions are good, her general belief that life “did not stand looking into very much” (197) causes her to ignore her husband’s routine indifference to her brother, and their dependence on Verloc results in her treating Stevie as more of a potentially destructive force.
than as a human being. To placate her husband, Winnie spends much of her time merely trying to keep Stevie “very good and quiet” (39).

Stevie’s mother also sacrifices for her son, but she thinks of him primarily as “a terrible encumbrance” (14). In order to secure Verloc’s continued care of Stevie, she decides to move into an almshouse, thereby making her son completely “destitute and dependent” (131). This attitude, however, along with her and Winnie’s indoctrination of Stevie that Verloc is “obviously yet mysteriously good” (146), only makes the young man more vulnerable to Verloc’s ultimate manipulation.

In contrast to the women’s sacrificial patronage, the paternal figures in Stevie’s life exist as the “torturers” in Crutchfield and Epstein’s formula. When Winnie marries Verloc, Stevie is finally free from his biological father’s wrath, and Verloc seems to be the trustworthy provider that Winnie and her mother perceive him as. Throughout the marriage, however, Verloc has only “extended as much recognition to Stevie as a man not particularly fond of animals may give to his wife’s beloved cat” (39). When Verloc accepts his wife’s suggestion that he allow Stevie to accompany him on his daily walks, Stevie’s docile nature and devotion inspire the agent to have his brother-in-law carry the bomb. Even though he “never meant Stevie to perish with such abrupt violence” or even “to perish at all” (188), Verloc remains impervious to the young man’s humanity, thinking only that “Stevie dead was a much greater nuisance than ever he had been when alive” (188). While Conrad relies on stereotypes in his depiction of Stevie’s caregivers, then, he also demonstrates the effects that these attitudes have on the individual. Stevie becomes more of a victim than he might otherwise have been because his caregivers focus on his impairments rather than his humanity.
Stevie’s main function in the novel, however, is not to illustrate the reality of a specific condition or treatment but to suggest the irrational nature of the other characters. Almost every individual or action in the novel appears idiotic from at least someone’s point of view (including the reader’s). Regarding the bombing, Conrad assigns his own perspective about the illogical nature of the real event to several characters. Anarchist Ossipon considers it “an imbecile business” (70), the Assistant Commissioner describes its “peculiar stupidity and feebleness” (119), and even the embassy’s First Secretary Vladimir, who conceives the plan, intends it to be an “alarming display of ferocious imbecility” (35).

Apart from that main event, Conrad defines the characters’ idiocy largely as a matter of bias stemming from one person’s scorn for another. Such judgments, however, are paradoxically undermined and supported by the narrator, leaving both the speaker and subject appearing idiotic. Chief Inspector Heat calls the Professor a “Lunatic” (85) and thinks of his boss, the Assistant Commissioner, as a “fool” (106), but the inspector’s own abilities are dubious. While Heat considers himself “the great expert of his department” (75), he undercuts his own superiority by believing that “the mind and the instincts of a burglar are all of the same kind as the mind and the instincts of a police officer” (81). Heat’s actions are also self-serving in that he tries to blame Michaelis for the bombing in order to protect his informant Verloc, despite knowing Michaelis is innocent. The narrator affirms this ambiguity in Heat’s character by telling us that the inspector “was not very wise—at least not truly so,” and makes a similar point about the Assistant Commissioner, whose wisdom is only “of an official kind” (75).

As in the conversation between Heat and the Assistant Commissioner, Conrad frequently points out the similarities between two persons who are in the process of disparaging each other. Just as Vladimir is accusing his secret agent of being “too lazy to think,” Verloc is filled with
“inward consternation” at his employer’s ignorance (32). The Secretary perceives himself as superior to the “soft-headed people” who previously ran the Embassy (26), but, while developing his bombing plan “on high, with scorn and condescension,” he displays “at the same time an amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the revolutionary world” (32). In addition, while Vladimir considers all of the anarchists to be “idiot[s]” (25), Verloc implies that Vladimir is one of “a few hundred imbeciles who aren’t fit to take care of themselves” (27).

Other characters, too, reflect this general state of idiocy. While Michaelis has a “simplicity of his mind” (92), his patroness exhibits a “certain simplicity of thought” (93). Similarly, the Professor demonstrates “an astounding ignorance of worldly conditions” (72), the Assistant Commissioner plays whist with a “simple-minded old Colonel” (89), and the narrator even mocks the “highly efficient authority” who has left a house addressed number ten next to one numbered thirty-seven (20). The Assistant Commissioner’s superior, Sir Ethelred, displays a questionable intellect as well. As McDonagh points out, the assistant Toodles “refers to the minister’s ‘massive intellect’ but this seems an ironic description, given the source and the minister’s refusal to hear details, as well as the minister’s complaint that his police force is making him ‘look a fool’” (314).

In addition to individual characters, Conrad extends the condition of idiocy to the larger public. The Professor considers the “multitude too stupid to feel either pity or fear” (244),18 Heat complains that the newspapers are “invariably written by fools for the reading of imbeciles” (173), and Vladimir calls the entire middle-class “imbecile” and “stupid” (31).

Conrad thus uses the language of disability to form a humorous if dismal portrayal of the modern human condition. That is, Stevie’s impaired intellectual ability serves not to cast him as

18 This joke seems intended to include even readers in the idiocy since the phrase recalls Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, and the novel is essentially a tragedy itself.
an Other but to define a new state of “normalcy,” and idiocy represents a “defective” state consisting of a lack of both logic and respect for others’ abilities. To turn the comedy into tragedy, Conrad again relies on disability, incorporating not only idiocy but a condition he finds worse, insanity. The chain of events begins when Vladimir develops what is clearly (to both his secret agent and the readers) an absurd plan for “blowing up the first meridian” (36). Verloc then manipulates Stevie into carrying the bomb, and Stevie is killed. For Winnie, the combination of her brother’s death and her husband’s treachery lead to catatonia, grief, and rage, until, finally feeling “an almost preternaturally perfect control of every fibre of her body,” she stabs her husband to death (212).

Following Stevie’s and Verloc’s deaths, then, the situation worsens through Winnie’s apparent insanity, which further spreads to Comrade Ossipon. When Winnie heads to the bridge to commit suicide, she encounters Ossipon (who was on his way to court the widow). While she begs him to save her, he realizes that she has murdered her husband and becomes terrified and delusional: “his terror reached its culminating point, became a sort of intoxication, entertained delusions, acquired the characteristics of delirium tremens. He positively saw snakes now. He saw the woman twined around him like a snake, not to be shaken off” (235). The anarchist ultimately steals Winnie’s money and abandons her, but when he reads later about her suicide, he becomes haunted by a newspaper’s description of the death as an act of “madness or despair” (246). Conrad then repeats this phrase several times, raising the question of whether Winnie literally has a mental illness or is acting out of desperation caused by another’s cruelty. At the end of the novel, the Professor seems equally afflicted, as he “could neither think, work, sleep, nor eat. But he was beginning to drink with pleasure, with anticipation, with hope. It was ruin” (249).
Conrad does not leave this dismal state of affairs only in the novel, however, but relates it to the general condition of modern civilization by drawing again on the historical usage of idiocy as a trope. Michel Foucault points out that the “face of madness,” which was indistinguishable from idiocy, served in late-fifteenth-century literature to represent the “nothing which is existence itself”; that is, the truth that “Life itself was only futility, vain words, a squabble of cap and bells” (15-16). Furthermore, in the period’s apocalyptic vision, madness has “become universal” (16), and “it is the tide of madness, its secret invasion, that shows that the world is near its final catastrophe” (17). This sense of madness as a portent of impending doom reappears at the end of the nineteenth century in a form only slightly different from its earlier one.

Madness, now more specifically located in the concept of idiocy, becomes a sign of the decline of civilization through the theory of degeneration. However, while idiocy appears in the novel primarily as an abstract concept (only rooted in Stevie’s condition), degeneration exists as a literal disorder in which idiocy is merely its most extreme form.

**Degeneration**

By the end of the nineteenth century, degeneration had become a catchword for a variety of social ills. Increases in crime, poverty, and disease led many to conclude that the human species was devolving to a more primitive state due to biological and/or environmental factors, and that steps should be taken to secure the survival of the “superior” members of the race.

Degeneration theory had its roots in the work of both Jean Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, despite the pair’s differences. The two agreed that all organisms were related and that they developed over time from simpler to more complex forms as they adapted to their environments. However, Lamarck’s theory of acquired characteristics held that organisms
develop traits during their lifetime that could be inherited by subsequent generations, whereas Darwin argued that evolution occurred through a process of natural selection. In his view, species had variations that made some of its members better suited to their environments and, therefore, better able to compete for nature’s limited resources. Those most “fit” for their environment would produce more offspring, while the others would die off. Through the language of Herbert Spencer, Darwin’s theory came to be known as “survival of the fittest.”

The Social Darwinists, such as Spencer, who applied the theory to human social and economic systems, added their own middle-class values to the concept of “fitness” and advocated efforts to increase the population of those they considered morally and racially superior, while allowing natural selection to eliminate the rest.

Degeneration theory advanced through the work of Bénédict Augustin Morel, who drew largely on Lamarck’s theory of acquired characteristics. Morel argued that abnormal mental conditions could be acquired in one generation and then passed on to the next, with each subsequent generation “manifesting respectively the ravages of alcoholism, hysteria, insanity, idiocy, and cretinism” (Pick 71). In addition, Morel and his followers related degeneration to the cycle of revolutions occurring in France. As Daniel Pick explains, “A natural (Lamarckian) law was extrapolated from the ‘mystery’ of revolution: namely that in the interaction of body and milieu, the experience of political and social disorder had entered the human system” (71); therefore, degeneration was spreading throughout society: “it was as though disorder had become uncontainable, spread all over the place, vitiating all classes” (72). In The Secret Agent Conrad similarly depicts widespread social disorder, not in terms of an actual revolution but in a general state of anarchy, which is then embodied in the novel’s proliferation of idiots, degenerates, and grotesques.

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19 Herbert Spencer coined the phrase, which Darwin used in the sixth edition of Origin of Species.
British degenerationists also foresaw widespread racial and social decline because the “inferior” classes seem to be expanding faster than the “superior” ones. To combat such fears, Francis Galton proposed the development of a “science of improving stock,” which he termed “eugenics”; that is, a science that “takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had” (17.n1). Galton advocated steps to promote “early marriages in the classes to be favoured” in order to “stock the world with healthy, moral, intelligent, and fair-natured citizens,” and argued that charity “should be so distributed as to favour the best-adapted races” (219). As he predicted, “the repression of the rest” would ensue “as a matter of course” (219). Ultimately, eugenics developed in two forms: encouraging marriage and childbirth among the “superior” classes (positive eugenics), and sterilizing, segregating, or euthanizing degenerates (negative eugenics).20

By the end of the century, the various aspects of degeneration theory would coalesce in the works of the two authors most pertinent to Conrad’s novel, Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau.21 Lombroso applied Darwinian theory to the study of criminals and developed the

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20 Sterilization laws were never enacted in Britain, but in the United States, thirty-one states had passed such laws by 1937 (Baron 127). Segregation through institutionalization became increasing popular in the first few decades of the twentieth century in both countries. In regard to persons considered mentally defective, a report by the British Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded (1908) recommended institutionalization primarily from the concern that such persons would give birth to “feeble-minded” children, despite evidence to the contrary (see Baron, chapter 4). As Jeremy Hugh Baron documents, methods to eliminate those persons a society deemed inferior date back to Aristotle, but such efforts gained momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to fears of race degeneration (chapter 7).

21 Which specific works Conrad read is not known; however, he mentions Lombroso in the novel, and most critics incorporate both Lombroso’s and Nordau’s works in their analyses. Lombroso’s Man of Genius was translated into English in 1891. Criminal Man was published in five editions between 1876 and 1897, although it was not translated into English until 1911, and then in only summary form (Gina Lombroso-Ferrero’s Criminal Man and Henry P. Horton’s abbreviated Crime: Its Causes and Remedies). However, the ideas in Criminal Man were widely circulated, and Conrad may have read the French translation (1882). An English translation of Nordau’s Degeneration was published in 1895.
concept of the “born criminal.” While conducting an autopsy as a young doctor, Lombroso noticed an anomaly at the base of the skull, “a small hollow,” which revealed to him “the nature of the criminal, who reproduces in civilized times characteristics, not only of primitive savages, but of still lower types as far back as the carnivore” (Lombroso-Ferrero 6-7). Further research on thousands of criminals led to a five-edition treatise *Criminal Man* (CM), in which Lombroso argues that “Up to thirty-five percent of all criminals are atavistic born criminals who differ physically from normal individuals” (338). These criminals also “have less sensitivity to pain than ordinary men,” “exhibit a certain moral insensitivity,” “an excessive sense of self-worth,” “an inclination toward revenge for even the pettiest motives,” and excessive passions for alcohol, gambling, eating, and sex (63-68). In the third through fifth editions, Lombroso also analyzes the majority of criminals who are not “born” types, listing the traits of the “insane,” alcoholic, political, religious, and “occasional” types of criminals. He eventually concludes that not only atavism but also alcoholism, disease, malnutrition, epilepsy, and even social factors can cause criminal behavior. In *Man of Genius* (MG), Lombroso broadens his study from criminals to artists, and argues that genius “is a degenerative psychosis” (359), a condition essentially existing at the other end of the spectrum from idiocy.

Max Nordau draws on Lombroso’s theories, among others, in his work *Degeneration* (1892). Nordau’s stated aim is to provide what he considers scientific proof that “the tendencies of the fashions in art and literature . . . have their source in the degeneracy of their authors” (viii). Responding to the critics of Lombroso who argued that degeneration is a disease and, therefore, cannot also be a matter of atavism, Nordau argues that “The disease of degeneracy consists precisely in the fact that the degenerate organism has not the power to mount to the height of evolution already attained by the species, but stops on the way at an earlier or later point” (556).

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22 The term “born criminal,” coined by Enrico Ferri, first appears in the third edition of *Criminal Man* (163).
To explain the prevalence of so many degenerates at the *fin de siècle*, Nordau describes the current urban metropolis as a place in which a citizen “breathes an atmosphere charged with organic detritus,” eats “stale, contaminated, adulterated food,” and “feels himself in a state of constant nervous excitement” (35). Ultimately, Nordau argues that urban centers, population increases, stimulants (alcohol, tobacco, etc.), and the rapid rate of cultural changes have produced a larger number of degenerates and hysterics than ever before, so that “We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic” (537). Nordau’s work also contains a passage about anarchists that seems to have inspired Conrad’s depiction:

> . . . [D]iscontent as the consequence of incapacity of adaptation, want of sympathy with his fellow-creatures arising from weak representative capacity, and the instinct of destruction, as the result of arrested development of mind, together constitute the anarchist, who, according to the degree of his impulsions, either merely writes books and makes speeches at popular meetings, or has recourse to a dynamite bomb. (265)

Notably, Conrad’s anarchists either write books (Michaelis), make speeches (Verloc in his role as undercover anarchist, as well as the others), or make bombs (the Professor).

While individual theories differed, the overall view among degenerationists was that the increase in disease, mental illness or “defect,” alcoholism, pauperism, and criminality that appeared in the late nineteenth century was attributable to atavism and/or urban living; that all of these conditions were hereditary and were exacerbated in each subsequent generation; and that the “unfit” were reproducing more quickly than the “fit.” This rise in degeneracy in turn

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23 Nordau was not the first to assert that the new urban environments posed a risk of degeneration (see McDonagh 274-75).
produced more social disorder, and the solution for these problems existed in the various forms of eugenics.

Although degeneration theory and eugenics were popular and influential, a number of opponents objected to the racism, classism, and sexism inherent in the groups’ arguments. Indeed, Donald J. Childs contends that a majority of scientists, politicians, and social reformers rejected eugenicist views.24 In The Secret Agent Conrad has fun with this debate by giving almost every character some trait described by Lombroso or Nordau, and by portraying the characters as animalistic, thus making them all seem degenerate. Or maybe not. As Cedric Watts suggests, Conrad is playing “an elaborate game of ironic endorsement and mocking reversal” of degeneration theory (Preface 92).

To begin with the most obvious example, several elements suggest that Stevie may be a product of degeneration. Lombroso’s name comes up when the anarchist Ossipon labels Stevie a “Very good type . . . of that sort of degenerate” (45). After diagnosing the young man based on his drawings, Ossipon adds, “It’s enough to glance at the lobes of his ears. If you read Lombroso—” (45). Apparently Stevie has the “large jug ears” that Lombroso describes (CM 310),25 and, according to the novel’s narrator, also has the “deep hollow at the base of the skull” (SA 44) that first inspired Lombroso’s study. In addition, Stevie has the type of speech that Nordau mentions as characteristic of degenerate artists: “Degenerates lisp and stammer, instead of speaking. They utter monosyllabic cries, instead of constructing grammatically and syntactically articulated sentences” (555). When upset, Stevie illustrates this manner of speaking, managing to form only such phrases as “Poor! Poor!” or “Poor brute; poor people!” (142, 143).

24 Childs notes various objections raised by Catholics, political conservatives, working-class representatives, and feminists, as well as others (4-9).

25 The Oxford English Dictionary defines “jug ears” as “large, protruding ears, likened to jug handles” (“Jug Ears”).
Stevie’s idiocy alone, though, would not only be sufficient to mark him as degenerate, but would also represent an extreme form of the condition. Similar to Morel, Henry Maudsley, whose work is cited by both Lombroso and Nordau, argues that a “pathological degeneration” of the mind takes place through generations, moving from “a predominance of the nervous temperament, irritability, a tendency to cerebral congestion, with passion and violent outbreaks,” through stages “going from bad to worse” until the end is “deaf-mutism, imbecility and idiocy, and sterility” (279). As an idiot, then, Stevie is at the low end of the degenerate scale. He may also be a product of heredity. The “irascible” temper of Stevie’s father signals his own degeneracy (38), and thus it is ironic that the father feels humiliated by his son’s condition when degenerationists would claim that he caused it. The father is also a “licensed victualler of the more common sort” (12), and many critics infer that he is an alcoholic. Lombroso contends that thirty-seven percent of born criminals have alcoholic parents (CM 343), and the view that alcoholic parents produced idiot children was a popular one. Conrad also hints that Stevie’s mother may have her own vices. The narrator comments that, “From her life’s experience gathered in various ‘business houses’ the good woman had . . . an ideal of gentlemanliness as exhibited by the patrons of private-saloon bars” (13). The use of quotation marks around “business houses,” and the woman’s familiarity with such men implies prostitution, which was also commonly attributed to degeneracy. The “business” that the father runs may indeed be part saloon and part brothel based on Winnie’s description of a childhood spent “on the deserted top floor of a ‘business house,’ dark under the roof and scintillating exceedingly with lights and cut

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26 This idea comes largely from Samuel Gridley Howe’s 1858 study, which linked idiocy to a family history that includes “intemperance,” although the theory was widely debated (McDonagh 260). McDonagh points out that “Locating idiocy in physiology provided a means to link the physical state of the idiot child with that of the degenerate parent, and . . . helped to consolidate the notion of the idiot as a degenerate, if not depraved, being” (259).
glass at the level of the street like a fairy palace” (197). Overall, the implication is that Stevie is the product of parents who are themselves degenerates.  

Other factors that suggest that Stevie is a degenerate include Lombroso’s statement that “The imbecile and feebleminded, succumbing easily to their first impulses or the suggestions of others, become accomplices to crime at the slightest prospect of gain” (CM 275). This susceptibility appears when the narrator describes Verloc’s manipulating Stevie into carrying the bomb as “Never had a sage a more attentive and admiring disciple” (189). Stevie also demonstrates the animalistic behavior indicative of degeneracy; at times he “prowled round the table like an excited animal in a cage” (51) and, at others, “moped in the striking fashion of an unhappy domestic animal” (154).

Finally, as Ossipon notes, Stevie’s favorite pastime also marks him as a degenerate. The narrator comments that Stevie occupies his spare time “by drawing circles with compass and pencil on a piece of paper,” and adds that “He applied himself to that pastime with great industry” (16). Later, the narrator both describes the drawings and provides an interpretation for them:

... circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. (44)

Stevie’s circles recall Lombroso’s discussion of the “Art in the Insane” in Man of Genius. Lombroso finds that many “insane” people include symbols in their artworks, which suggest to him a “stage through which primitive peoples... passed, before the discovery of alphabetic

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27 Lombroso cites the famous study of the Juke family to support his thesis that degeneracy is hereditary, claiming, “200 criminals, 280 sick or impoverished individuals, and 90 prostitutes or women with venereal disease had descended from one drunkard” (CM 126).
writing” (189-90). He specifically mentions both the “eccentricity” of the drawings (186) and that “Many continually repeat the same idea” (204), qualities that suggest Stevie’s work. In particular, Lombroso spends several pages, with pictures, describing the work of a specific individual who drew a design that may relate to Stevie’s. The picture Lombroso refers to contains concentric circles (representing the tribes of Israel and the progress of the Holy Spirit), and includes the artist’s own tools, a “square, compass, triangle, and pencils” (193-98). Stevie also draws concentric circles and uses a compass and pencils. In addition to circles, Lombroso’s artist includes triangles, which form “the Seal of the Prophet” (195). Apart from Stevie’s circles, the other geometric figure that appears in the novel is the triangle, which serves as Verloc’s secret designation. When mentioning the triangle, the narrator describes “the celebrated agent ∆, whose warnings had the power to change the schemes and the dates of royal, imperial, or grand ducal journeys, and sometimes caused them to be put off altogether!” (30); thus, Conrad’s triangle also recalls Lombroso’s artist by suggesting Verloc as a sort of secular prophet. For a modern “artist,” however, Stevie’s existential insight is appropriately one of “cosmic chaos,” rather than the divinely ordered universe of Lombroso’s Christian, but the circles also seem to be an accurate representation of the anarchical world in which Stevie lives.28

Conrad undermines degeneration theory, however, by applying it to almost all of the characters and by making each of them oblivious to their own degenerate traits. Immediately after Ossipon diagnoses Stevie, the narrator undercuts this perception by describing Ossipon as merely an “ex-medical student without a degree” (45). Conrad also gives Ossipon the same facial features as those of Lombroso’s born criminal. His “flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mould of the negro type” (49) reflect Lombroso’s contention that “criminals resemble

28 Stevie’s existential insight also provides another example of the stereotypical representation of fool as truth-teller, as I discussed earlier.
savages and the colored races” (CM 91). Ossipon also turns out to be a thief (when he steals Winnie’s money), and thus his “flattened nose” reflects the “squashed noses” of thieves that Lombroso identified (CM 51). Ossipon further has “high cheek bones” (43), and Lombroso finds that “seventy-four percent” of criminals have “wide or overdeveloped cheekbones” (CM 49). Finally, Ossipon is known for having “a collection of women” (245) (although he is primarily interested in their money rather than sex), and, following the disturbing encounter he has with Winnie, “could face no woman” (249). Similarly, Lombroso contends that criminals show signs of “sexual overindulgence followed by impotence” (CM 215). If Ossipon is correct in his diagnosis of Stevie’s condition, then he, too, is a degenerate.

Degeneration theory also turns out to be a matter of opinion when Karl Yundt exclaims that “Lombroso is an ass” and an “idiot” (45, 46). However, Yundt, too, has some of the characteristics that Lombroso contends resemble “the colored races”: “thinness of body hair, low degrees of strength and below-average weight” (CM 91). Conrad’s “terrorist,” as Yundt calls himself, is bald, leans on a stick to walk, and has a “skinny neck” and “skinny groping hand” (SA 42). On the other hand, since most of Yundt’s physical appearance is clearly the result of old age, he cannot easily be labeled a degenerate. Moreover, the narrator makes it clear that Yundt is not really a criminal, pointing out that “The famous terrorist had never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice” (46).

The anarchist in the group who has committed a crime is Michaelis, who resembles the “mattoids” that Lombroso describes in both Criminal Man and Man of Genius. Lombroso defines mattoids as those who have “the appearance of genius and the substantial character of the average man,” and who thus form “the link between madmen of genius, the sane, and the insane properly so called” (MG 15). Connecting the mattoids to “political and religious lunatics” (MG
chapter 4), Lombroso contends that they “repeat in their conceptions the ideas of stronger politicians and thinkers, but always in their own way, and always exaggerated” (MG 213). The group demonstrates an “affection” for “the human race in general, sometimes reaching such a point as to become exaggerated altruism” (MG 210); their “most distinctive feature” is “the abundance of their writings” (CM 285), although they “fill entire volumes without sense or savour” (MG 214); and they are characterized by “abstemiousness,” such as one “who ate only bread” and another “who ate only chickpeas and beans” (CM 284).

All of these characteristics reflect Michaelis, the “ticket-of-leave apostle” (41). As an anarchist, Michaelis is clearly political, and, like the mattoid, he espouses his own version of someone else’s ideas, forming a philosophy that one critic calls a “Marxian/Utopian/Christian/ anarcho-socialism” with “the spirit of the later Tolstoy” (Marcus xlvii). As an “apostle,” Michaelis also appears religious; he has “the temperament of a saint” (94), and his “zeal . . . seemed something predestined and holy” (102). Furthermore, Michaelis is abstemious and animalistic (rabbit-like), living “on a diet of raw carrots and a little milk,” and sitting in a “tiny cage” (243). In addition, like Lombroso’s mattoid, Michaelis is a prolific writer whose efforts lack reasoning, and he has an “exaggerated altruism.” According to the Professor, Michaelis is writing a biography in “three parts, entitled—‘Faith, Hope, Charity,’” which elaborates “the idea of a world planned out like an immense and nice hospital, with gardens and flowers, in which the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak,” but, the Professor adds, “The poverty of reasoning is astonishing. He has no logic” (244).

Based on Lombroso’s description of the mattoid, Michaelis appears to qualify as a degenerate, but Conrad again undercuts the diagnosis, for Michaelis is not much of a criminal. Since he believes that Capitalism is “doomed in its cradle” (47), his view is that an anarchist’s
job is only to educate “the masters of the world,” and to do so “cautiously, even timidly” (48).
The only crime he has committed is taking part in a plot to “rescue some prisoners from a police
van” (91). Because a constable is killed during the event, Michaelis is sentenced to fifteen years
in jail, but the narrator assures us that Michaelis was unaware of the death and was only the
locksmith, “neither more nor less than a burglar” (92).

Continuing the series of contradictory viewpoints, Conrad sets Michaelis’s desire that the
strong should care for the weak against the opinion of the Professor, the only one of the
anarchists who takes real action to further his desire for revolution. To the Professor, the weak
are the “source of all evil!” (244), and, haunted by this “great multitude of the weak,” he
advocates an extreme form of eugenics that includes everyone but himself. 29 Clearly mocking
eugenicists, and notably their stance on people with disabilities, Conrad has the Professor
advocate exterminating “First the blind, then the deaf, and the dumb, then the halt—and the
lame—and so on,” so that only “I remain” (244). This eugenicist view also proves ironic as
Inspector Heat thinks of the Professor himself in terms of the “physical wretchedness of that
being, so obviously not fit to live” (82), and, at the end of the novel, the Professor seems to be
just the type of weak degenerate he despises: “frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable, . . . like a
pest in the street full of men” (250).

In many ways, the Professor also conforms physically to Lombroso’s born criminal, who
has a “microcephalic skull,” “low sloping forehead,” “large jug ears,” and “beardlessness” (CM
339). Conrad’s Professor has a skull that is “frail”; the “dome of the forehead seemed to rest on
the rim of the spectacles” (i.e., a “sloping forehead” inherited from his father, 72), “flat, large

29 While most eugenicists called for institutionalization of people with disabilities believed to be hereditary, some,
such as authors H. G. Wells, G. B. Shaw, and D. H. Lawrence, advocated extermination programs (Childs 9-10).
The Professor’s views are also prescient. As Suzanne E. Evans documents, “Between 1939 and 1945 the Nazi
regime systematically murdered hundreds of thousands of children and adults with disabilities as part of its so-called
‘euthanasia’ programs” (15).
ears departed widely from the sides of his skull,” and only a “thin dark whisker” (57-58). The Professor’s animalism appears in his home “littered with straw” (58) and others’ descriptions of him as a “miserable organism” (62) and a “mad dog” (104). Furthermore, the Professor’s father was a preacher, and Galton had argued that members of the clergy often produced “feeble-minded children” (McDonagh 273).

In creating this character, however, Conrad draws more on Nordau’s theories than on Lombroso’s. The Professor, so-called because of his “having been once assistant demonstrator in chemistry at some technical institute” (68), has compensated for his “humble origin” by adopting “a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition” (72). As Norman Sherry points out, the Professor conforms to Nordau’s description of the “ego-maniac,” one who “must of necessity immensely over-estimate his own importance and the significance of all his actions” (Nordau 257, Sherry 276). For physiological reasons, the ego-maniac is “not in a position to comprehend his relation to other men and the universe, and to appreciate properly the part he has to play in the aggregate of social institutions” (Nordau 257). He “must, therefore, necessarily suffer from the world and from men. . . . He is in a constant state of revolt against all that exists, and contrives how he may destroy it, or, at least, dreams of destruction” (263). The Professor’s sense of superiority, his desire to exterminate the weak, and his function as a bomb-maker all make him characteristic of the ego-maniac.\(^{30}\) Nordau further provides the example of Caligula, noting “that folly of Caligula in which the unbalanced mind boasts of being a laughing lion, believes himself above all restraints of morality or law, and wishes the whole of humanity had one single head that he might cut it off” (265). Similarly, Conrad’s narrator compares the Professor to Caligula, but comments that the anarchist is “More

\(^{30}\) Notably, the Professor’s desire to exterminate the weak recalls Kurtz’s declaration in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to “Exterminate all the brutes!” (111), and Kurtz, too, seems to be an ego-maniac in Nordau’s terms.
fortunate” because he can direct his hatred to one individual, Inspector Heat, who embodies “all
the forces he had set in defiance: the force of law, property, oppression, and injustice” (74-75).

While it may seem appropriate for Conrad to assign degenerate traits to the anarchists, he
applies such features to the government officials as well, again using disability to suggest a
general state of anarchy. The Professor’s archenemy, Inspector Heat, has a “bullet head” (99),
which would seem to conform to Lombroso’s description of the skulls of born criminals, which
have “small cranial capacities,” “sloping foreheads,” and “protuberant brows” (304). Tatiana M.
Holway also notes that “Chief Inspector Heat’s head is not unlike that of the violent criminal,
who, according to phrenologists, displayed the tell-tale ‘sugar cone head,’ or ‘murder bump’”
(263n4). Heat also has a “heavy jaw” (99), which aligns with the “overdeveloped jaw” that
Lombroso lists as a common trait (CM 339), and he even goes “slinking” around like “a member
of the criminal classes” (SA 167).

Heat’s superior, the Assistant Commissioner, also shows some signs of degeneration. He
is a “dark man, with the ridges of the cheek-bone well defined” (163), implying both the racial
qualities and “jutting cheekbones” that Lombroso describes (CM 339). The Commissioner also
has a “sensitive liver” (87), and Lombroso finds that “Liver problems are common among
criminals, partially the result of alcoholism” (CM 201). Conrad may also be hinting that the
Commissioner has epilepsy. When standing at the window, he “ceased to think completely for a
time. That utter stillness of his brain lasted out three seconds” (87). In Lombroso’s findings,
“epileptics display all the atavistic characteristics of born criminals, as well as additional
pathological anomalies” (CM 338). The Commissioner also seems degenerate in his resemblance
to a fish: “His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the

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31 Conrad also describes one of the children in his short story “The Idiots” as having a “bullet head” (n.pag.).
water had been run off. . . . He might have been but one more of the queer foreign fish that can be seen of an evening about there flitting round the dark corners” (123-24).

If the Assistant Commissioner resembles a fish, so does his main foe, Vladimir, the First Secretary at Verloc’s embassy. The Commissioner’s view is that it is Vladimir’s government “that grumbles most at our police” (187), and he describes his pursuit of the Secretary as attempting to “catch a whale” (177). Although Vladimir is the one who plans the bomb explosion (a clearly criminal act), he does not have Lombrosian traits but is physically underdeveloped: “He had with his smooth and rosy countenance the air of a preternaturally thriving baby” (24). From Verloc’s perspective, though, Vladimir is a “venomous beast” and “swine” (195).

In keeping with the novel’s contradictions, Verloc is the one who most resembles a “swine.” The narrator describes him “wallowing” in bed “till noon every day” (13) and as “Undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style” (18). The comparison to swine is particularly significant because it links him to Nordau’s description of “the filth-loving herd of swine, professional pornographists,” who “have freely chosen their vile trade, and prosecute it from cupidity, vanity, and hatred of labour” (557). Verloc sells pornography at his shop, and, as Nordau suggests, has chosen “this peculiar line of business by an instinctive leaning towards shady transactions, where money is picked up easily” (SA 51); that is, Verloc has a “dislike of all kinds of recognized labour” (50).

While selling pornography would make Verloc a degenerate in Nordau’s view, the secret agent considers himself a “protector of society” (12), and this protection apparently includes preventing the hereditary transmission of degeneracy by selling condoms. Tom Rice points out that Verloc sells “some object looking obviously and scandalously not worth the money which passed in the transaction: a small cardboard box with apparently nothing inside” (SA 11). In
addition, when Winnie handles the business, the young male customers “would get suddenly
disconcerted at having to deal with a woman,” and buy a bottle of ink only to discard it outside
(11). Rice also notes the narrator’s statement that Verloc’s shop sells “more or less secret
wares—the poor expedients devised by a mediocre mankind for preserving an imperfect society
from the dangers of moral and physical corruption” (SA 209). Rice interprets this line as a
reference to Verloc’s “sale of information to the police and foreign embassies,” commenting, “it
is difficult to see how condoms could preserve society from moral as well as physical
corruption” (133). However, in light of the hereditary nature of degeneration and its application
to both “moral” and “physical” defects, condoms are precisely what society would need.

While Verloc’s pornography business makes the agent a degenerate in Nordau’s view, he
is also a criminal in Lombroso’s system. The Assistant Commissioner suggests that Verloc is
like “most criminals [who] at some time or other feel an irresistible need of confessing” (179),
although he contends that the agent “cannot be defined as a hardened criminal” since it is
“obvious that he did not plan the death of that wretched lad” (180). Verloc’s own view of his
actions is “I have been mad for a month or more, but I am not mad now” (171). Both the
suggestion that Verloc was temporarily “mad” and his desire to confess make
him what
Lombroso categorizes as a “Criminal of Passion” rather than a born criminal (CM 105-07).

This category applies more to Winnie than it does to Verloc, however. Lombroso argues
that, “Unlike the apathetic common criminal, the criminal by passion displays exaggerated
sensitivity and excessive affections” (CM 105). Before their crimes, these criminals “are known
for honorable conduct,” and, when arrested, they are “almost insanely emotional,” “enjoy
confessing,” and then “commit suicide or attempt it” (106). Like Lombroso’s criminal of
passion, Winnie has demonstrated “honorable conduct,” has shown an “excessive” affection for
her brother (even to the point of entering a loveless marriage in order to protect him), and commits suicide. She also quickly confesses, or at least thinks she has: “She had no conscience of how little she had audibly said in the disjointed phrases completed only in her thought. She had felt the relief of a full confession” (228). Winnie’s criminality appears when she murders her husband, and the narrator describes the moment as an atavistic one: “Into that plunging blow, . . . Mrs. Verloc had put all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms” (213). In addition, at the moment of the murder Winnie becomes her brother incarnate: “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, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes” (212). This Jekyll and Hyde moment suggests the reappearance of a primitive nature, which aligns with Lombroso’s theory, and Ossipon recognizes this degeneracy in Winnie when he encounters her after the murder. Realizing what she has done, Ossipon becomes “scientifically” terrified of her and decides that she is not only “the sister of the degenerate,” but “a degenerate herself of a murdering type” (234). Ossipon’s reference to Stevie thus completes a circle of degenerates not unlike the young man’s depiction of chaos.

By assigning such traits to so many characters, Conrad effectively creates the urban nightmare degenerationists feared. The implication may be that they were right and that degeneration is rampant; after all, few of these people behave like model citizens. At the same time, Conrad is mocking a theory that would label a person degenerate based on the shape of an ear (Lombroso) or a type of artwork (Lombroso and Nordau), as such designations soon apply to almost everyone. Furthermore, Stevie, whose idiocy represents the most extreme case of
degeneracy, is one of the most moral and, arguably, logical characters in the book. The game continues, though, as Conrad adds elements of the grotesque to the novel, which create both a sense of absurdity and highlight the social constructions of disability.

The Grotesque

Although Conrad employs the grotesque in *The Secret Agent* in a variety of ways,\(^{32}\) I will be focusing on his depiction of extremely distorted bodies since that feature relates most clearly to the subject of disability.\(^{33}\) The aesthetic concept of the grotesque originated in the fifteenth century in reference to ornamental designs characterized by a combination of human, animal, and plant parts. By the end of the sixteenth century, the grotesque in literature had come to include not only hybrid figures but also physically distorted ones (Krzychylkiewicz 211). In the predominantly realistic mode of modernist literature, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson finds that what had been “fantastic” has transformed into the “abnormal,” so that “The modernist gargoyle is the physically disabled figure,” whose body “is perpetually read as a sign for a degenerate soul or a bankrupt universe” (*Extraordinary 112*). Garland-Thomson warns, though, that the metaphorical quality of the grotesque “discourages literary critics and authors from a politically conscious perspective that might examine disabled characters in terms of minority culture issues” (112). In my discussion of these characters, I will therefore address both their narrative function and the way other characters respond to physical difference.

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\(^{32}\) For analyses of the grotesque in the novel that extend beyond bodily distortions, see Nettels and Matthew Oliver.

\(^{33}\) Like other critics in the field of Disability Studies, I am including “abnormal” bodies in my discussion of disability. See, for example, Garland-Thomson’s analysis of Mrs. Hedges in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) regarding a character who is extremely large (*Extraordinary Bodies* 107-11); Sander L. Gilman’s article “The Fat Detective: Obesity and Disability” (Snyder et. al. 271-79); and Mitchell and Snyder’s discussion of the grotesque figures in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (*Narrative Prosthesis*, 141-62).
As with idiots and degenerates, a number of characters approach the category of grotesque. Karl Yundt, for example, has the hybrid form of the medieval grotesque figures. He is “old and bald, with a narrow, snow-white wisp of a goatee hanging limply from his chin” (42), is “draped in the wings” of his coat (46), has a “clawlike hand” (49), takes a “constitutional crawl every fine morning” (50), and produces a “venomous spluttering” when he speaks (48). Like Frankenstein’s creature, Yundt seems to have been crafted from a variety of human and animal parts. He is further made grotesque by the incongruity between his frail body and angry rhetoric. His dream consists of forming a group of men who have “No pity for anything on earth, including themselves,” and seeing “death enlisted for good and all,” although he admits that he “could never get as many as three such men together” (42). Despite his expression of “underhand malevolence,” he retains only a “worn-out passion” and an “impotent fierceness” (42). Yundt’s grotesque features make him more of a caricature than an individual, with the infirmities of old age functioning primarily as a source of comedy.

The charwoman, Mrs. Neale, is also grotesque and comically portrayed, but she becomes slightly more human. While cleaning the floor, Neale appears “On all fours amongst the puddles, wet and begrimed, like a sort of amphibious and domestic animal living in ash-bins and dirty water” (153). The combination of “amphibious” and “domestic” make her grotesque, but Winnie’s reaction complicates the portrait. Winnie intervenes to stop the charwoman from conning money from Stevie, knowing that the woman will likely spend it on “ardent spirits in a mean and musty public-house” (153), but then Winnie sympathizes with the woman’s difficult life: “Of course, what is she to do to keep up? If I were like Mrs. Neale I expect I wouldn’t act any different” (153). Winnie’s comment exists as a rare moment of empathy toward someone
with an “abnormal” body, and it appropriately comes from someone who has personal experience with disability.

The character actually called “grotesque” in the novel is Michaelis, and, although still a source of humor, he is much more developed than Yundt or Neale. When we first meet this anarchist, the narrator describes him as “round like a tub,” with “an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a pale, semi-transparent complexion,” in addition to an elbow that has “no appearance of a joint, but more like a bend in a dummy’s limb” (41). The round body, pale complexion, and jointless limb make Michaelis appear like a ventriloquist’s dummy spouting a muddled form of political rhetoric. Because the description comes from the narrator, the passage makes the character seem ridiculous to the reader, but within the text the other characters’ reactions are more complicated.

At a party given by his “lady patroness,” an “active-looking man” raises the issue of Michaelis’s weight, commenting, “Eighteen stone, I should say, and not five foot six. Poor fellow! It’s terrible—terrible. . . . The man is virtually a cripple” (93-94). While the weight estimate may or may not be accurate, the man’s tone is clearly condemnatory as the repetition of the word “terrible” suggests. Also, Michaelis “waddled,” the narrator tells us (93), but he is not crippled. Coming from an “active-looking man,” who, moreover, has a “soldierly voice” (94), the comments recall the period’s concern with physical fitness. William Greenslade notes that, “By the turn of the century the fate of the nation and the health of the mass of the people had come to seem inseparable” (182). In particular, reports about the “parlous state of health” of

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34 Sherry suggests that Michaelis’s obesity was inspired by that of Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin, who emerged from prison having “swelled enormously in bulk, and now weighed twenty stone,” and that Conrad uses this trait to make the character “a comically pathetic, and at the same time, repulsive being” (273). Whether Sherry means that Michaelis appears “repulsive” to readers or to the other characters is unclear, but the comment highlights the need for an awareness of disability issues.

35 Eighteen stones is the equivalent of about 250 pounds.
recruits to serve in the Boer War led to the formation of such groups as the National League for Physical Education and Improvement, which considered “The Great Question of the Day” to be “the Health of the People” (183, 186). Michaelis is distinctly at odds, then, with the one of the nation’s major concerns and is, therefore, perceived as physically disabled, “virtually a cripple,” and deserving of both pity and charity; as the patroness suggests, “The poor creature is obviously no longer in a position to take care of himself. Somebody will have to look after him a little” (94). Although the patroness considers Michaelis to have “the temperament of a saint” (94), her condescending attitude and interest in him arise primarily from his obesity: “It was as if the monstrosity of the man . . . had fascinated her” (95).

On the other hand, if Michaelis is not fit to be a productive member of society, it is because society has made him so. Matthew Oliver points out that the discussion of Michaelis’s weight occurs in connection with the narrator’s description of his crime and imprisonment. Because the constable who was killed had a family, Michaelis’s story “gets read as a foreign assault on the family and the foundations of the nation” (214). The inordinate length of his sentence arises from the public’s outrage, and, thus, “Both body and identity become victims of the violence of state power and mass identity” (214). This “mass identity” transforms after Michaelis is released and public sentiment turns in his favor under the tutelage of the lady patroness.

Once the subject of his weight arises, however, other guests add their own opinions, calling him “Quite startling,” “Monstrous,” “Most painful to see,” and “Grotesque” (94-95). The grotesque here is the type Lennard J. Davis describes as “the ugly, what makes us wince, look away, feel pity” (151). Davis points out that “the grotesque is defined in this sense as a disturbance in the normal visual field, not as a set of characteristics through which a fully
constituted subject views the world” (151). Michaelis is repeatedly judged based on his crime (which provokes outrage), his imprisonment (which brings pity), or his weight (which causes revulsion). However, when Michaelis’s own sense of himself emerges, the grotesque disappears. As he leaves the party, Michaelis shakes the patroness’s hand “with unembarrassed friendliness,” glances at the others in “serene benevolence,” and exits “unconscious of the glances following him across the room” (93). Michaelis ignores the others’ responses to him because “He was like those saintly men whose personality is lost in the contemplation of his faith” (92). For Michaelis himself, not only his “personality,” but his body becomes unimportant in relation to his creed.

As with Michaelis’s obesity, the Professor’s small size makes him grotesque. The Professor is not only “little” (a word used repeatedly) but “stunted” (72, 82) and “undersized” (73). His small stature particularly disturbs Comrade Ossipon, and in a scene between the two, the narrator highlights their physical difference. While calling the Professor a “bespectacled, dingy little man” or the “calm little man” (57, 59), the narrator refers to Ossipon as the “big fellow” (59) or “the big and muscular Ossipon” (59). The narrator also stresses this size difference in the characters’ likeness to animals. The Professor is a “short, owlish, shabby figure” (70), who lives in a sort of nest, “a small house . . . littered with straw, and dirty paper” (58), and wears a bomb strapped to his chest with a detonator tube “resembling a slender brown worm” (61). In contrast to the tiny bird-like Professor, Ossipon resembles a huge mammal who “growled . . . bearishly” (63). The Professor becomes grotesque not merely because of his “stunted” size but also because of the incongruity between his small size and large ego; as the narrator comments, “The lamentable inferiority of the whole physique was made ludicrous by the supremely self-confident bearing of the individual” (58). Indeed, the Professor’s self-confidence
is so pronounced that it intimidates the larger Ossipon: “When talking with this comrade, . . . the big Ossipon suffered from a sense of moral and even physical insignificance” (58).

The Professor also appears grotesque in the incongruity between his small size and the large crowds he fears. When he walks among these masses, “every individual almost overtopped his stunted stature” (72). To him, “They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force,” and he is afraid that they are “impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror too, perhaps” (73). Yet the Professor compensates for this fear by keeping himself armed with explosives; thus, while “Lost in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his power” (73). He also stands up to Inspector Heat because he knows the detective is aware that he carries a bomb. Like Michaelis, the Professor perceives himself differently than society does, focusing not on his body but his ability to cause destruction.

While the grotesque makes the characters seem absurd to readers, it also allows for an examination of how people with “abnormal” bodies are perceived. The body becomes a marker of identity, just as being an idiot defines Stevie. This issue is relevant to people in general who are labeled as having a disability. For example, Simone Aspis, a woman labeled as having “learning difficulties,” points out that “the name, and the identity ‘learning difficulty’ have been imposed on me by the system, in particular, the education system which pre-defines ‘learning ability.’ . . . Once a child is labeled in this way it becomes almost impossible to change the image the label creates” (174, italics original). Once we identify someone as an idiot, a cripple, etc., we mark them in a way that makes it difficult for them to be perceived as fully human. Indeed, the best that Verloc can manage to think of Stevie is that “perhaps his brother-in-law was not such an idiot as he looked” (154, my emphasis).
Conclusion

*The Secret Agent* is a significant novel in terms of modernist representations of disability for at least two reasons. First, Conrad disrupts the convention of using disability to create an Other through its proliferation of characters with idiotic, degenerate, and grotesque traits. By the end of the novel, Stevie no longer seems unique and even appears more logical than some. *The Secret Agent* is also notable in that the series of contradictory viewpoints combined with acts of exploitation or cruelty illustrate the ways in which disability occurs not just because a person has an illness or impairment but because others discriminate against that person based on an assumed position of normalcy. Overall, though, the novel presents disability in a stereotypically negative manner. Conrad uses the characters’ mental and physical conditions to denigrate and mock them, to provoke pity from readers, to portray a society rife with anarchy, and, implicitly, to plea for some form of social order.

In the next chapter I examine two novels that further the modernist’ approach to disability by moving beyond Conrad’s objective viewpoint to present the interior consciousness of the disabled figure. Notably, both are written by authors with personal experiences of disability—Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*—and the two provide insightful accounts of individual experiences with disabilities while also highlighting the stigma attached to such conditions.
Chapter Two:
Modernist Style: The Inward Turn and Portrayals of Mental Illness

In the previous chapter, I examined one of the developments that modernists brought to their fictional portrayals of disability, which is that illness and impairment no longer marked one individual as an Other but, instead, become a means of characterizing an entire generation. That usage continues throughout the period, but most novelists move beyond Conrad’s largely figurative applications to create several characters with specific health disorders. In this chapter I discuss Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which features not only shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Smith, but also a cast of characters who appear emotionally unstable and experience psychosomosis. Indeed, their “symptoms” are all so similar that the line between sanity and insanity that Woolf initially conceived becomes an indistinct one. I also analyze F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* (1933), in which Nicole Diver has schizophrenia, and her husband and most of the other characters are alcoholics. In this case, the behaviors differ, but Fitzgerald treats them all as a lack of self-control. Ironically, Nicole is the one who most tries to exert agency over her life, but the novel’s focus on Dick Diver makes his wife’s efforts detrimental to his own emotional wellbeing. As in *The Secret Agent*, both of these works present one individual who stands out as being the most obviously disabled, and my analysis focuses primarily on that character, but the profusion of ill health once again signals that the authors perceived the generation itself as “defective.”

My main interest here, however, is on the way the experimental writing styles of these authors affected the ways they portrayed disability. One of the hallmarks of modernist fiction is
the absence of the omniscient authority conveyed by traditional third-person narrators. As Jesse Matz explains, for modernists, “truth and meaning vary with point of view. Things appear differently to different people, and the modern novel therefore tends to vary its perspectives” (219). This shift toward multiple subjective perspectives is particularly compelling in portraits of mental illness, in which a person’s words and actions often seem confusing to others. Presenting specific third-person observations thus enables authors to address the various types of stigma that accompany mental illness, while the description of a character’s thoughts when experiencing psychosis serves to convey the individual’s perspective as well as to clarify the causes of their behaviors. Authors like Woolf and Fitzgerald also bring their personal knowledge of disability to their fiction, rather than offering a traditional ableist perspective. In Mrs. Dalloway Woolf combines her own experience of psychosis with her concerns about portraying characters through the perceptions of their consciousness to present what she called “the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side” (Diary 207). Her own interactions with doctors and awareness of public opinions further result in her using the novel to criticize both the medical system and contemporary perceptions of illness. What begins as an authentic representation of an individual’s experience of mental illness, however, ultimately lapses into metaphor. We witness the thoughts and actions of Septimus Smith from his symptoms and treatment to his suicide, but the novel ends with its title character, Clarissa Dalloway, reinterpreting his death as an act of defiance and a message for her own empowerment. In Tender is the Night, Fitzgerald similarly draws on both his wife Zelda’s schizophrenia and his own alcoholism and depression in

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36 Nicole Ward Jouve notes that “There are diverging versions of the severity, frequency and nature of Woolf’s mental illness, and even of what the diagnosis should be,” including manic depression, Cyclothymia, hysteria, and schizophrenia (247).
portraying the marriage of Nicole and Dick Diver. The author’s experiment with non-linear plot structure and romantic sensibility, however, lead him to sensationalize both the nature and cause of his heroine’s illness, although he somewhat balances that perspective with first-hand accounts of Nicole’s own perceptions. In contrast, Fitzgerald’s astute understanding of his own “crack-up” results in a realistic portrayal of alcoholism as the author experienced it. For both novels, the use of multiple subjective points of view highlights some of the differences between experiencing disability and observing those experiences in others.

“The Sane and the Insane Side by Side”

Woolf’s main concern in Mrs. Dalloway is with creating her characters through an amalgam of the thoughts and perceptions they develop over the course of a single day. During the same year the novel was published, she discussed the issue of characterization in the essay “Modern Fiction,” arguing that “Life escapes” much fiction because of the authors’ attempts to force events into conventional structures (105-06). Woolf observes that “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” receives “a myriad impressions,” and the task of novelists, then, should be to “trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (106-07). Although the day Woolf presents in Mrs. Dalloway is hardly ordinary—it contains Clarissa’s party, Septimus’s suicide, and the returns of Peter Walsh and Sally Seton—Woolf sticks to her desire to record the thoughts and perceptions of the characters as they occur.

37 Fitzgerald made a chart listing parallels between Zelda’s “actual case” and Nicole’s, but apparently invented the incest event (Bruccoli 18, 4).

38 Fitzgerald wrote an essay describing his experience with alcoholism and depression as “The Crack-Up.”
The novel’s main focus is Clarissa Dalloway, but Woolf creates a “double” for her in the character Septimus Smith (“An Introduction” 11), a young World War I veteran suffering from shell shock. An already sensitive young man, Septimus witnesses the death of a dear friend during the war and suddenly finds that “he could not feel” (74): “beauty was behind a pane of glass. Even taste . . . had no relish to him. . . . He could reason; he could read, . . . [but] he could not feel” (74-75). Over the course of the next five years, Septimus suffers from “headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams” (77), grandiose delusions, and hallucinations, and he ultimately commits suicide. Although Clarissa and others exhibit heightened emotions and psychosomatic symptoms, Septimus obviously functions as the novel’s representation of insanity.

To Woolf, the sane and insane minds were distinct states as evidenced by her extratextual comments in the novel’s manuscript, such as “Sanity & insanity. Mrs. D. seeing the truth. SS seeing the insane truth” (qtd. in Hite 264), and her concern with “the mad chapters” or “the mad scenes” that she mentions in her diary (Diary 321, 323). As critics have noted, however, the division between sanity and insanity in the final text is hard to discern. David Bradshaw, for example, questions whether Clarissa is “simply eccentric or precariously unbalanced” (xix), while Sigrid Nunez finds the minds of the characters “all more or less the same”: “All are obsessive and easily stirred. They all talk to themselves, . . . are all highly susceptible to impressions [and] . . . terribly sensitive to nature” (142). In general, multiple characters “suffer” (Peter 36, Rezia 55) feel “tortured” (Clarissa 10, Peter 68, Rezia 56), or cry at some point (Septimus 119, Clarissa 149, Peter 39, and Rezia 56). More specifically, several also experience synesthesia. When Septimus hears a car’s horn that “rose in smooth columns,” Woolf adds in parentheses, “that music should be visible was a discovery” (58). Similarly, when Rezia hears a

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39 The term “shell shock” was created by medical practitioners during World War I to describe “a range of physical, physiological, and psychological factors” variously understood as “a psychological reaction to war, as a type of concussion, or as a physiological response to prolonged fear” (Loughran 102, 107).
woman singing, the sound becomes an “invincible thread” that “wound up into the air” (70). Clarissa, too, perceives sound as motion: “robes of sound from the street, . . . blowing out the blinds” (103). Several characters also experience emotional distress as physical pain. At one point, Septimus has the sense that “His body was macerated until only his nerve fibres were left” (58), while Rezia feels “rocked” by her husband’s behavior (56). Likewise, Clarissa’s hatred for Miss Kilman “had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine; gave her physical pain” (10-11), and, in turn, Miss Kilman’s enmity toward Clarissa becomes “hot and painful feelings [that] boiled within her” (105). Peter, too, when forced to realize that his relationship with Clarissa was over, feels “as if she had hit him in the face” (55).

These similar behaviors and perceptions suggest, as other modernist novels do, that disability pervades the generation. Clarissa describes the general malaise as a “well of tears” that had been “bred in them all, all men and women” (8), but the destruction caused by the war has resulted in more than mere grief. The conditions that Woolf depicts indicate that many have become emotionally unstable and developed psychosomatic symptoms. Septimus stands out from the others only because he becomes psychotic, unable to distinguish reality from delusion.

Woolf’s concern with the mind’s perceptions and the division between sanity and insanity, however, invites us to compare the differences in her characters’ responses to the events around them. For example, when the car passes on Bond street, both Clarissa and Septimus sense its importance. However, while Clarissa imagines that its passenger is “probably the Queen” and comports herself with “extreme dignity” as the car passes (14), Septimus feels “terrified” and self-conscious: “Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose?” (13). Similarly, when the skywriting plane soars overhead, members of the crowd try to discern its letters, while Septimus thinks, “they are signaling to me”
In general, then, others’ thoughts tend outward—events are external happenings they merely witness—while Septimus’s thoughts are egocentric; all is meant for him, directed toward him alone.

These delusions alternately comfort and terrify Septimus. While sitting in Regent’s Park, he first has the sense that “Long streamers of sunlight fawned at his feet. The trees waved, brandished. We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. . . . To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy” (59). A moment later, Septimus first hears and then sees his dead friend: “Evans sang, among the orchids. . . . now Evans himself” (59). He initially feels frightened: “‘For God’s sake don’t come!’ Septimus cried out. For he could not look upon the dead” (59). But then he interprets the apparition as a revelation: “It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. I must tell the whole world” (59).

These shifting responses demonstrate the nature of his particular experience of psychosis. At one moment he feels uplifted by the beauty he perceives, but this pleasure quickly transforms into terror. This emotion then abruptly changes into a sense of astonishment, followed by a compulsion to share the vision with others.

It is understandable that these mood shifts create confusion in those around him, and we learn their reactions through both a third-person narrator’s descriptions and other characters’ observations. Woolf was particularly concerned with the insufficiency of third-person description. In the essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” she criticizes earlier writers for their emphasis on external details, what she calls “the fabric of things” (112). Characters will appear differently to writers and readers in different ages, Woolf argues, for they are “of unlimited capacity and infinite variety” (119). The external details of a character thus provide insufficient and ambiguous information.
Woolf demonstrates the limitations of this approach in one section of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the narrator describes how an onlooker might judge Septimus:

To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile—his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large, so that he was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other. (71)

This description is accurate to the extent that Septimus does work as a clerk and does seem to be both intelligent and sensitive. Woolf’s choice of details and syntax, however, destabilize any further interpretation. The phrase “might have been” qualifies the determination of Septimus’s socioeconomic class as a clerk “of the better sort,” and the adjective “better” further raises the question of bias (“better” than whom and in whose opinion?). The subordinating conjunction “for” also sets up doubts about the basis for such a determination, which exists in the insubstantial detail that he wore brown boots and the odd, prosopopoeial evaluations that “his hands were educated; so, too, his profile.” Molly Hite also points out that “if we take phrases like ‘as eyes tend to be’ to indicate a familiarity with types, . . . the rhetoric of types has been inverted” (258). Hite notes that “One of the most cherished conventions of physical characterization in Western literature is surely that eyes are the most important feature of the face: the defining attribute, the repositories of uniqueness, the windows of the soul, and so on,” but in this passage “Not only Septimus’s eyes but all eyes ‘tend to be . . . eyes merely’” (258). Woolf’s diction and syntax thus highlight the ambiguity of objective description, a point that she emphasizes in the narrator’s final equivocation that Septimus is “a border case, neither one thing
nor the other.” By relying on external details, any final judgments about his character remain elusive.

In regard to disability, the use of a third-person observer also demonstrates the limitations that others have of understanding a person’s experience with mental illness. To an onlooker, psychotic behavior can seem inexplicable, such as Rezia demonstrates when she observes Septimus while he is experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations (he hears voices and sees a dog transform into a man), in addition to grandiose delusions (he believes that he alone is being given existential truths). Woolf begins the moment with Rezia’s observations:

He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world, he said. . . . [T]hey were quite alone. But he began to talk aloud, answering people, arguing, laughing, crying, getting very excited and making her write things down. Perfect nonsense it was. (57)

Even though her husband is visibly distraught, Rezia cannot understand what Septimus is experiencing; his words and behavior seem like “nonsense.” Woolf then counters this perspective with Septimus’s own thoughts, presented through indirect interior monologue:

[H]e, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning, which now at last, . . . was to be given whole to . . . “To whom?” he asked aloud, “To the Prime Minister,” the voices which rustled above his head replied. The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first, that trees are alive; next, there is no crime; next, love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them forever. (57)
While both passages indicate that Septimus is visibly agitated, the second explains what Rezia misses. We understand what Septimus is hearing, and his behavior appears as a logical response to the situation. Because he believes that he is being told universal truths, he struggles for a way to reveal them.

Woolf’s choice of indirect interior monologue over other methods of reporting his thoughts, such as direct quotation or stream of consciousness, also allows her to guide readers’ interpretations. In the next paragraph, for example, the narrator points out how terrifying Septimus’s hallucinations are for him:

. . . a Skye terrier snuffed his trousers and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man! (58)

By telling us that the hallucination was “horrible, terrible,” the narrator provokes sympathy for Septimus, which counters both Rezia’s frustration and the critical views of illness that other characters express. Clarissa, for instance, describes Evelyn Whitbread’s condition as a “nuisance” (5), and Lady Bruton similarly disparages women like Clarissa “who often got in their husbands’ way, . . . and had to be taken to the seaside in the middle of the session to recover from influenza” (90). While others find illness bothersome or intrusive, Septimus struggles against a problem that he cannot control.

Helping readers understand Septimus’s personal experience also counters the public’s perception that health or illness was a matter of will, an opinion that Rezia expresses:

Everyone has friends who were killed in the War. . . . But Septimus let himself think about horrible things, as she could too, if she tried. . . . He said people were talking behind the bedroom walls. . . . He saw things too—he had seen an old
woman’s head in the middle of a fern. Yet he could be happy when he chose. (56, my italics)

Rezia’s assumption that Septimus “let” himself think about horrible things or that he could be happy when he “chose” echoes the advice given by Dr. Holmes, who insists that “health is largely a matter in our own control” (78). As Diane Price Herndl points out, by the turn of the century doctors increasingly believed that “nervous illness was a matter of an intent to be ill” and that “if the patient decided to be well, she could be” (119). Whereas Price Herndl focuses primarily on the treatment of women, Joanna Bourke finds the same attitudes in the medical care of World War I soldiers. Bourke points to a popular booklet addressed to shell shock and other patients that “instructed men to ‘use self-control’ and exercise ‘will power’ to put ‘worries and thoughts resolutely from [them]’” (118). But treating neurasthenia “as though it were a disease of the ‘will,’” Bourke adds, “had important ramifications for the mentally ill as it made men increasingly blameworthy for their own illnesses” (117).

Woolf dramatizes the result of such blame by having Holmes’s diagnosis lead directly to Septimus’s suicide. After seeing the doctor, Septimus thinks of himself as guilty of “sin” and “crime,” rather than as suffering from an illness:

So there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but all the other crimes raised their heads and shook their fingers and jeered and sneered over the rail of the bed . . . ; how he had married his wife without loving her; had lied to her; seduced her; outraged Miss Isabel Pole, and was so pock’d and marked with vice that women shuddered
when they saw him in the street. The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death. (77, my italics)

Holmes’s insistence that there is nothing medically wrong leads Septimus with little choice but to blame himself for his illness. He begins thinking that “Once you stumble, . . . human nature is on you” (78) and starts to believe that the “whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes” (78). When Holmes returns, Septimus relents to “their idea of tragedy” and cries “I’ll give it you!” as he jumps out the window (126, 127). Septimus does not kill himself, then, because of his psychosis or even because he wants to; he does so because the doctors have made him feel guilty for his condition, have turned his illness into a crime.

Like Rezia and Holmes, some critics accept the contention that illness in the novel is a matter of will. Alex Zwerdling, for example, suggests that Septimus “surrenders to the force of feeling in all its variety and intensity. . . . His emotions are chaotic because they are entirely self-generated and self-sustained” (76, my italics). Zwerdling does not provide evidence to support this conclusion, however, and the passages that portray Septimus’s symptoms indicate otherwise. He initially experiences “panic” at his inability to feel (74), and, at one point, explicitly tries not to “go mad”: “the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling . . . would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more” (19). Similarly, when he hallucinates, he tries not to see the visions: “White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look” (21). Instead of succumbing to illness, Septimus struggles against a condition that causes him panic, terror, and guilt.

Septimus’s death is particularly poignant because “He did not want to die. Life was good” (127). He appears here, as he has through most of the novel, as a person who suffers and feels threatened, and we feel sympathy for him. At this point in the novel, his death also serves
as a powerful condemnation of the era’s failed healthcare system. At the end, though, Woolf allows Clarissa to reinterpret the suicide, thus transforming Septimus from a unique individual into a sacrificial figure. Woolf has prepared us for the ending in two ways. She has made Septimus’s visions prophetic, made the “madman” stereotypically into a seer, and she has used his illness as means of criticizing the medical system. In an earlier passage, Woolf had deviated from the novel’s overall ambiguity to have the narrator indulge in a “startling tirade” against Sir William (Hite 255). The narrator spends several paragraphs castigating the doctor’s worship of “Proportion” and “Conversion” (84-87) and then, when Septimus dies, Woolf has Clarissa adopt the narrator’s complaint: “Suppose he had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, . . . capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul . . . might he not then have said . . . they make life intolerable, men like that” (157). What for Septimus had been a matter of guilt and judgment becomes for Clarissa an act of “defiance” (156). But as Deborah Guth points out, “by reducing Septimus to a symbolic leap of defiance, Clarissa . . . indulges in ritual sacrifice—the sacrifice of an individual reality in favor of the vision” (39). Although Woolf makes Septimus want to continue living, she does not explore the possibilities of such a life. Perhaps because her own healthcare had failed her, Woolf does not seem to consider that Septimus could have a meaningful existence. Instead, she uses his death to provide Clarissa a means of empowerment over her own life. Clarissa imagines that, in dying, Septimus has “preserved” some intangible essence of himself, a “thing” that she herself had “let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter” (156). In addition, she considers, Septimus has defied the control that others like Sir William seek to assert, as well as ended the “terror” that life itself brings (157). Although she had “escaped” such forces, Septimus had actively resisted them, had “killed himself” (157). His death thus becomes for Clarissa “an attempt to
communicate” (156) the message that suicide is an option, which gives her a sense of control over her own life.

At the same time, Woolf seems to be closing the gap she has created between sanity and insanity. She had portrayed the insane consciousness as hallucinatory and egocentric, but now Clarissa has those same qualities. Like the moment when Septimus saw Evans healed of his wounds, Clarissa “saw” Septimus jump from a window and become impaled on the spikes (156). Both also interpret their vision as a message intended for themselves. This final doubling also provokes a reconsideration of all of the characters’ experiences of suffering, shifting emotions, synesthesia, and psychosomatic pain. The distinction between sanity and insanity now seems a dubious one, and Woolf reinforces that interpretation with the novel’s ending. Similar to the way Septimus felt both exhilarated and frightened at the sight of Evans, Peter now feels a combination of “terror” and “extraordinary excitement” at Clarissa’s approach (165).

**Decadence and Illness**

In *Tender is the Night* Fitzgerald also explores the issues surrounding mental illness and, like Woolf, does so from multiple perspectives. The main characters are Dick and Nicole Diver, and the novel portrays their relationship from the initial courtship to the breakup of their marriage. Similar to the way Woolf’s character Septimus Smith develops shell-shock following the trauma of his friend’s death, Nicole develops schizophrenia following the trauma of incest. To that depiction Fitzgerald also adds a portrait of alcoholism, which appears as a common trait among several characters and most vividly in the novel’s central figure, Dick Diver. Indeed, alcoholism functions in *Tender* much the way emotional instability does in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as a sign that the generation itself is “defective.” While Woolf portrays her contemporaries as
traumatized by war, however, Fitzgerald shows them to be morally bankrupt. He treats alcoholism and even schizophrenia more like self-indulgent behaviors than health conditions, and so the advice Dick receives and gives to Nicole, like Bradshaw’s to Septimus, is to learn self-control. Deviating from Woolf, then, Fitzgerald essentially aligns himself with the era’s perception of illness as a matter of intent. Fitzgerald also devotes more time to third-person accounts of Nicole’s behavior than to her personal experiences. These observations add to Woolf’s portrayal of the confusion and blame that attend mental illness by demonstrating the ways in which this generation also viewed such conditions as shocking and scandalous. The novel’s non-linear plot structure enhances that perception, as readers witness Nicole’s symptoms before learning their cause, and thus her condition initially appears as a dark mystery that underlies the couple’s seemingly happy marriage. The sections that present Nicole’s point of view, however, add balance to that perspective. Unlike the drive to suicide that Woolf imagines, Fitzgerald creates a rare depiction of a character learning to live with a mental illness. Scandal also accompanies Dick’s increasing alcohol use, but the novel overall provides a comprehensive account of the progression and effects of alcoholism and depression. Finally, Fitzgerald is more concerned than Woolf with the effects of mental illness on the caretaker. Reflecting the author’s own self-described “crack-up,” Tender is ultimately the portrayal of its hero’s downfall, which is caused in part by the demands of caring for a wife with schizophrenia.

Fitzgerald’s perception that he and his contemporaries had become decadent and self-indulgent fits in well with the modernist convention of using disability to portray the generation itself as “defective.” The stability of the past, what Dick calls its “tremendous sureties” (67), is gone, its remains represented now by the graves of war veterans or their injured bodies, “long trains of blinded or one-legged men, or dying trunks” (131). The “great feudal families” of
America (145) have degenerated too, leaving Nicole only one of a crowd of patients at the mental health clinics.

The most common affliction, however, is alcoholism, which affects Dick, Devereux Warren, Albert McKisco, Abe North, the cook Augustine, and the patient Francisco. The latter’s case, while a minor incident in the plot, also highlights the era’s perception of homosexuality as a mental illness, although that depiction is somewhat offset by the characterization of Luis Campion. Campion does not appear as an ill person in need of a cure, but he does seem emotionally unstable. Hyper-sensitive to the tension around him, Campion admits that violent people “upset me so I sometimes have to go to bed for days” (51). Indeed, violent behavior itself seems to be another symptom of disability. In particular, Tommy Barban responds to anxiety and distress by repeatedly seeking another war to join, and sudden acts of violence—such as the duel, the shooting by Maria Wallis, and the murder of Jules Peterson—suggest a general atmosphere of stress and conflict. Fitzgerald treats most of these conditions as behavioral issues rather than illnesses, however. Although there was some awareness at the time that alcoholism was a disease, it appears here mainly as a matter of self-indulgence; not all men, Nicole points out, “wallow in alcohol” (114). Even Nicole’s relapses seem, at least to her husband, a problem of her losing self-control (213). The generation as a whole thus seems to have lost the moral integrity of the past and, therefore, to be behaving irresponsibly. This conduct then becomes manifest in the various forms of disability that affect most of the novel’s cast.

Nicole, however, is the character who would have been considered “disabled” at the time the novel was published. The beautiful daughter of Devereux Warren, Nicole is sent at the age of

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40 According to Stephen T. Moran, “the ‘disease concept’ of alcoholism was current in some circles,” but “the Victorian interpretation of drinking as a sinful activity that led to self-destruction remained popular in America in the 1930s” (85-86).
sixteen to Dohmler’s clinic, where she is diagnosed with schizophrenia brought on by the trauma of incest. While under treatment, she meets her future husband, the handsome and charming Doctor Dick Diver. Apart from the period immediately following the trauma, Nicole’s symptoms are episodic in nature and, over the course of the story, her health improves to the point where she is able to break her dependence on her doctor-husband.

Like Woolf, Fitzgerald presents his story from multiple points of view, depicting both the characters’ own experiences with illness and others’ perceptions of their behaviors. The novel’s non-linear structure, however, results in Fitzgerald’s portraying Nicole’s symptoms initially through the astonished responses of those around her. Although Fitzgerald later revised the chronology and had the book republished, my analysis is based on the initial version, which is organized into three sections. Book 1 introduces the Divers through the perspective of a young actress, Rosemary Hoyt, who is enchanted by both and falls in love with Dick. In book 2, Fitzgerald shifts back in time to portray Dick’s past as a promising psychiatrist, Nicole’s schizophrenia and its cause, and the first years of their marriage. The final section traces the couple’s breakup, as Dick begins to drink heavily and Nicole’s health improves. Because

41 Although the novel’s chronology is inconsistent, Franz states that when “Mr. Warren arrived at the clinic,” his daughter Nicole was “a girl of sixteen” (143). According to Warren, Nicole’s symptoms began appearing “About eight months ago, or maybe it was six months ago or maybe ten” (144), which makes Nicole about fifteen or sixteen when the incest occurred.

42 Writing in 1989, psychiatrist David I. Gottlieb suggests that “Today Nicole would have been diagnosed as a borderline schizophrenic or borderline psychotic. Many times during the course of the novel, she seems to function in non-psychotic ways. Paranoid schizophrenics do not. Characteristically, borderline psychotic individuals have many neurotic symptoms with episodic periods of ‘craziness.’ We usually attach the diagnosis of borderline psychosis to someone who suffers from anxiety, depression, physical and hysterical symptoms, as well as difficulties relating to intimacy with people and their environment,” which “is certainly the case with Nicole” (359-60). Although Fitzgerald makes incest the clear cause for Nicole’s illness, Gottlieb adds that “Nicole was in her early teens when she was seduced by her father,” and that “This, in and of itself, would not cause a schizophrenic or borderline schizophrenic condition, but it might be something that could irritate an underlying difficulty” (360).

43 After receiving mixed reviews, Fitzgerald decided that the problem lay with its chronology: “Its great fault is that the true beginning—the young psychiatrist in Switzerland—is tucked away in the middle of the book” (qtd. in Cowley Introduction 104). He then rearranged the plot to proceed chronologically, and Malcolm Cowley published a revised version in 1951.
Nicole’s behavior initially shocks both characters and readers, as does the incest that caused it, the result is a sensationalized portrayal of mental illness.

Indeed, Fitzgerald adopts many of the conventions of the Victorian sensation novel, although I doubt that was his intention. These novels were a form of domestic fiction that was popular in and around the 1860s. As Patrick J. Brantlinger explains, the stories were “sensational” partly because of their content—usually featuring “crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings”—and partly because “new narrative strategies were developed to tantalize the reader by withholding information rather than divulging it” (1-2). Although written over half-a-century later, Tender is the Night contains these same features, both in terms of its content—Nicole’s mental illness and the incest that precipitated it—and in terms of the structure in which those elements are revealed. Fitzgerald’s decision to present Nicole’s condition as a mystery may have been related to his concern with avoiding “inevitability,” as he had criticized the way another author made everything “too beautifully caused—one can guess ahead”; his own solution, Fitzgerald wrote, was “the to-and-fro, keep-facts-back mystery stuff” (qtd. in DiBattista 26). But this strategy in Tender results in a depiction of schizophrenia as a scandalous family.

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44 The novel reflects other conventions of sensation fiction as well. Brantlinger notes that these works frequently included “violent and thrilling action” (5), which is also true of Tender: Tommy Barban and Albert McKisco fight a duel, Maria Wallis suddenly shoots her lover in public, Rosemary finds Jules Peterson’s dead body in her bed, Abe North is “beaten to death in a speakeasy” (223), Dick gets arrested for a drunken brawl involving a cab driver and police officer, and Mary North and Lady Caroline get arrested for “pretending to be sailors on leave and [picking up] two silly girls” (337). Such events in Tender serve mainly to characterize the decadence of the post-war generation, what Milton Stern calls “the collapse of a civilization into barbarism” (11). Sensation novels also feature the doubling of both characters and incidents (Brantlinger 24), which Fitzgerald mimics in his portrayal of Abe North as “a complete foreshadowing of what happens to the young promise embodied in Dick” (Stern 11) and in his repeated suggestions of incestuous situations. In addition to Devereux Warren’s sexual relations with Nicole, Dick has an affair with the teenage star of Daddy’s Girl and further compares her to his own daughter, noting that Rosemary “was young and magnetic, but so was Topsy” (232). Dick is also mistaken for the rapist of a five-year-old girl and admits to kissing the fifteen-year-old daughter of a patient. In addition, Fitzgerald’s portrayal reflects the way that the plots of sensation novels often “lead to the unmasking of extreme evil behind fair appearances” (Brantlinger 11). While Nicole Diver is not guilty of a crime, her beauty recalls this stereotype, and the novel even hints that she is partly guilty for her sexual relations with her father.
secret. Reading the novel today, in an era when mental illnesses are better understood and less stigmatized, makes Fitzgerald’s use of sensational fiction strategies particularly troubling.

Like the authors of these earlier novels, Fitzgerald is exploiting the public’s interest in scandal. As Brantlinger points out, “Bigamy, adultery, and the problem of divorce law were much on the minds of Victorians in the 1860s,” but “rather than striking forthright blows in favor of divorce law reform and greater sexual freedom, sensation novels usually tend merely to exploit public interest in these issues” (5-6). Similarly, in Fitzgerald’s time, Freud’s analyses of incest and mental illness provoked the public’s interest, yet Tender contains neither an investigation into psychoanalysis nor an indictment of the healthcare system such as we found in Mrs. Dalloway. Indeed, Fitzgerald presents little information about Nicole’s treatment and, instead, focuses on revealing her symptoms in periodic moments designed to shock both characters and readers.

We first meet Nicole through the romantic perceptions of Rosemary Hoyt, who finds the couple enchanting. Some critics also adopt this perspective, such as Pamela A. Boker, who considers book 1 to present a “love story of two exceptionally contented and perfectly adjusted individuals”; “Not until the very end of book 1,” Boker states, “does the reader suddenly realize that something is very wrong with this fabulous design for living” (303, my italics). The clues to that “something,” though, actually begin when Rosemary first encounters the couple on the French Riviera. In particular, the narrator interrupts Rosemary’s point of view to comment that her growing enchantment with the Divers is a naïve one, for the couple’s “simplicity” is “part of a desperate bargain with the gods [that] had been attained through struggles she could not have guessed at” (29).
From this ominous beginning, Fitzgerald proceeds to reveal Nicole’s symptoms in two parallel scenes in which observers witness her behaving hysterically. The first occurs when Rosemary is attending the Divers’ dinner party, and Violet McKisco returns from the bathroom with “her eyes staring, her mouth working a little, . . . a person crop-full of news” (45). She has clearly witnessed something scandalous, but Tommy Barban stops her before she can gossip about the Divers, leaving both characters and readers in a state of suspense for the next several chapters.

At the end of book 1, Fitzgerald recalls this mysterious moment by creating a parallel bathroom scene. At this point, Jules Peterson has been killed and his body has mysteriously appeared in Rosemary’s bed. To protect the starlet’s reputation, Dick exchanges the bloody bedspread with a clean one from Nicole, who is then found in the bathroom, “swaying sidewise” and speaking irrationally: “It’s you . . . come to intrude on the only privacy I have in the world— with your spread with red blood on it. I’ll wear it for you—I’m not ashamed” (127). In case readers have missed the point, Fitzgerald clarifies that “now [Rosemary] knew what Violet McKisco had seen in the bathroom at Villa Diana” (128). Rosemary’s reaction to the scene is not dissimilar from Violet’s; she is left trembling and later disparages Nicole as having been “Out of her Mind” (184). Dick’s response is notable, too, in that he repeatedly commands his wife to “Control yourself!” (127-28), as if her hysteria did not have a legitimate cause.

In fact, Nicole’s own words explain her behavior, but Fitzgerald has not yet given readers enough information to understand her. She mentions “All Fools Day” when “we had a party on the Zürichsee, and all the fools were there, and I wanted to come dressed in a spread but they wouldn’t let me [...] so I sat in the bathroom and they brought me a domino and said wear that. I did. What else could I do?” (127). While these remarks are indecipherable at the time, they make
sense when we learn later that Nicole is the victim of incest and that the bloody bedspread reminds her of the event. As Susann Cokal points out, while hospitalized at the Zürichsee clinic, Nicole apparently wanted to “wear the sign of her trauma” (82), but the staff forced her instead to conceal that trauma by wearing a domino (a costume mask). Since we know at this point that Dick has begun an adulterous affair with Rosemary and that Nicole has been aware of Rosemary’s attraction to her husband since the beginning (27), we can conclude that the bloody bedspread indicates to Nicole “that Dick has betrayed her with Rosemary” (Metzger 51). The parallel nature of the scenes also suggests that Nicole’s concern over Rosemary was what prompted the first episode of hysteria, but Nicole’s words indicate that the bedspread actually represents two traumatic events: both her father’s and Dick’s betrayals. Structurally, this second scene enhances the sensational nature of Nicole’s illness as her behavior shocks readers, and Fitzgerald then delays explaining that behavior to shift back in time and re-focus the story on Dick’s past.

Within this next section, however, we do get a description of Nicole’s own feelings through the letters she writes while under treatment. We learn that Dick first met Nicole while she was a patient at “the first modern clinic for mental illness” (137), and that she began writing him soon after. To Dick, the letters appear “sprightly and sentimental” (138), but he distinguishes between an earlier group that “was of marked pathological turn,” and the later ones, which were “entirely normal” (138). The first group is notable in that it reveals both Nicole’s state of mind and her version of events. She seems generally lucid, even eager to obtain work as a translator, but she also makes incoherent comments, such as “I’ve thought a lot about moonlight, too, and there are many witnesses I could find if I could only be out of here” (138). She also reveals two incidents of violent behavior. Once, after receiving some phonograph
records, Nicole admits, “I broke them all” (140), and, at a candy store, “I almost hit the man with the weight, but they held me” (141). Nicole’s explanation of the initial stage of her illness also reflects her frustration at not understanding what is wrong with her:

Last year or whenever it was in Chicago when I got so I couldn’t speak to servants or walk in the street I kept waiting for someone to tell me. . . . Only no one would tell me everything—they would just tell me half and I was already too muddled to put two and two together. . . . I grew sicker and sicker and there was no one to explain to me. (139)

Nicole realizes that her behavior is abnormal, but she has repressed her memory of the traumatic event. Eventually, though, she indicates that she has either remembered or been told about the incest: “The mental trouble is all over and besides that I am completely broken and humiliated. . . . If I had only known what was going on like I know now I could have stood it I guess for I am pretty strong” (140). From Nicole’s perspective, then, she has experienced anxiety when speaking to strangers, become angry at being denied an explanation, and then, once she does understand, feels “humiliated” but also strong enough to bear the truth.

As with Woolf’s descriptions of Septimus’s hallucinations, the letters help to counter the sense of stigma that the third-person observations have produced. From her own accounts, Nicole’s behavior is understandable, and she appears overall as a young woman who has been traumatized but who also wants control over her life. Fitzgerald somewhat overshadows that perspective, however, by following it with first Devereux Warren’s version of events and then the doctors’ diagnosis. These perspectives help fill in the novel’s portrait of mental illness, as they illustrate both the public’s general ignorance and the doctors’ lack of sympathy.
Fitzgerald presents Warren’s explanation through multiple layers of narration, which both obscure the nature of Nicole’s illness and delay the revelation of its cause. Warren tells his story to Dr. Dohmler, who relays it to the pathologist Franz Gregorovius, who then tells Dick. Warren also speaks in German instead of his native English, has “whiskey on his breath,” and cannot remember dates or even “exactly where we were when she began to do funny things” (144). Dohmler further suspects that the man “was lying” (146), but Warren seems mainly to be trying to conceal his own culpability. He claims Nicole began “to do funny things—crazy things,” such as accusing the valet of making “some kind of indecent advances to her” (144-45). Then, “She had a fit or something—the things she said got crazier and crazier. . . . Almost always about men going to attack her, men she knew or men on the street—anybody” (145). On one level, Warren’s use of words like “funny,” “crazy,” and “fit” illustrate the general public’s lack of understanding about mental illness, and they seem particularly insensitive coming from the patient’s father. Warren’s explanation, however, also enhances the novel’s suspense. The full truth remains a mystery until Dohmler forces Warren to return a second time, and the final revelation appears every bit as sensational as readers have been led to expect: “After her mother died when she was little she used to come into my bed every morning. . . . We were just like lovers—and then all at once we were lovers” (147). The mystery is now solved, but the story’s sensational aspects are so powerful that critics have disregarded the differences between versions. Since Warren would be particularly worried about the accusations Nicole makes, he makes it sound like she fears men in general. In her version of events, however, she writes that “One man was nice—he was a French officer and he understood. . . . We were friends” (139), and she pursues the relationship with Dick only about six months after arriving at the clinic.
Nicole does not seem fearful of men as a group, but Warren’s version then feeds the doctors’ diagnosis.

The doctors’ version, as Franz reports it to Dick, is that Nicole first “felt complicity,” and then, from “sheer self-protection she developed the idea that she had had no complicity” (149). Franz’s opinion reflects the view that most analysts held at the time; they either refused to believe reports of incest or “blamed the victim,” saying that the child unconsciously desired the molestation because of an “abnormal psycho-sexual constitution” (DeMause 128). The doctors thus present Nicole as sexually deviant, which adds to the sensational nature of her story and also sets up readers to accept Dick’s perception that she seduces him against his will. Instead of appearing as the innocent young victim of an assault, Nicole now seems to be a seductress.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald offers a balanced depiction of the early stages of Nicole and Dick’s relationship, which, like the letters, presents her behavior in a sympathetic light. Many critics blame Nicole for Dick’s decline, but I think Fitzgerald’s strategy is to make both responsible. Todd Onderdonk, for example, contends that “In marrying his rich patient, Nicole Warren, the psychiatrist Dick Diver trades intellectual mastery and manly autonomy for a role of inglorious service to powerful heiresses [Nicole and her sister]; and when his usefulness wanes, he is discarded by his female masters” (65). Similarly, Tom C. Coleman argues that Dick “disintegrates beneath the demands which Nicole makes upon him in his triple role as doctor, father, and husband” (36). It is true that Dick thinks Nicole wants “to own him” (192), but Fitzgerald drops several hints about Dick’s own responsibilities and failures. When Nicole writes him from the clinic—about fifty letters over an eight-month period (137)—the narrator adds that “Dick had come to wait eagerly” for the letters and that “he answered them all” (138, 142).

45 Lloyd DeMause also points out that Freud decided that reports of infantile “seductions” were false but never doubted “the clear memories of seduction in later childhood and adolescence that his patients had spontaneously reported to him” (126-27).
also feels that “By no conscious volition of his own, the thing had drifted into his hands” (158), but he relates the moment to an incident in childhood when he hid a key from his mother, and thus his guilt over the key indicates his guilt over the situation with Nicole. Finally, at the insistence of the doctors, Dick does try to end the relationship, and Fitzgerald has the two meet again only by accident. But in that encounter, we again witness Nicole’s fortitude. Dick tries to insist that she is “teasing” herself about their feelings for each other, but Nicole has been through this kind of deception with her father and now stands up for herself: “don’t pretend I don’t know—I know everything about you and me” (174). Because this section is framed from Dick’s point of view, it is easy to interpret Nicole as the seductress Dick perceives her to be, but the text actually makes it clear that he is an equal participant in the courtship.

Fitzgerald then shifts perspectives to present the first years of the couple’s marriage from Nicole’s point of view, and this section serves both to make her a more sympathetic character and to explain more aspects of her illness. The passage is stylistically experimental, partly featuring Nicole’s side of various conversations and partly reporting her thoughts at several different moments in a technique that might be termed “internal analysis.”46 That is, unlike the indirect interior monologue that Woolf uses to convey Septimus’s perceptions, Fitzgerald presents Nicole’s thoughts in an ordered way that makes her seem more philosophical than psychotic. When she imagines “the dead watching from up those hills” (180), for example, she seems to be thinking of the past’s influence on the present, not to be having delusions.

46 Lawrence Edward Bowling distinguishes between stream-of-consciousness technique and “internal analysis”: “If the author limits his direct quotation to that area of consciousness in which the mind formulates its thoughts and feelings into language, the method may still be called by the comprehensive term the stream of consciousness technique, . . . If, however, the author intervenes in any way between the reader and the character’s consciousness in order to analyze, comment, or interpret, then he is employing not the stream of consciousness technique but a fundamentally different method which may correctly be designated internal analysis, . . . an indirect statement in the words of the author” (345).
The fragmented nature of the passage may also be an attempt to mimic her schizophrenia, which manifests sporadically. At times she appears lucid and rational, and in these moments her perspective contradicts Dick’s view that she is trying to control him with her money. Nicole initially states that “it doesn’t matter to us how much I’m allowed . . . Dick has enough to take care of us” (179), and, after their first child is born, her argument for buying a larger home is a logical one: “we have every reason for taking the bigger apartment. Why should we penalize ourselves just because there’s more Warren money than Diver money” (180). She also expresses a desire to work, although she is never able to focus on one project. At the clinic, for example, she had mentioned her ability with languages and interest in being a translator, and now she plans to “look over the whole field of knowledge and pick out something and really know about it” (182). Since she could simply rely on her father’s wealth, both her practical concerns with money and interest in working indicate her strength of character and attempts to have some control over her life. More broadly, these moments result in an atypical portrayal of a character learning to live with a mental illness.

Even the account of two of her relapses now appears understandable instead of shocking. Nicole describes being “gone again by that time—trains and beaches they were all one,” and she explains “That was why he took me travelling but after my second child, my little girl, Topsy, was born everything got dark again” (181). Despite the abstruse phrasing, we can deduce that Nicole has had a relapse after their first child is born, which Dick treats by taking her travelling, and then has another following the birth of Topsy. Piecing the elements together, we see that, from age eighteen to twenty, Nicole has partially recovered from the trauma of incest, gotten married, and had two children, all during a time when she was “deprived of any subsistence
except Dick” (203). From this perspective, she appears not as a seductress or manipulator, but as a young woman striving to recover from a traumatic experience and lead a productive life.

The narrative then returns to its primary focus, however, which is Dick Diver. Fitzgerald indicated in his notes for the novel that he conceived of his hero as a young, idealistic psychiatrist with a promising future, who slowly loses “his idealism [and] talent and [turns] to drink and dissipation” (“Author’s Notes” Bruccoli 6). Fitzgerald planned the decline to occur partly because “years of living under patronage etc. and among the burgeoise [sic] have seriously spoiled him,” and partly because “The difficulty of taking care of [Nicole] is worse than he has imagined” (7). But Dick’s own flaws also contribute to his deterioration. Although Fitzgerald conceived of Dick’s drinking as one of the character’s many “faults” (14) rather than as a disease, the novel shows his alcoholism to be a disabling condition.

To portray Dick’s downfall, Fitzgerald shifts between romantic and realistic modes of storytelling. He sets up his hero to be an idealist, a man engaged in the “heroic period” of his life and “ready to be called to an intricate destiny” (132, 134). At the same time, Dick has the sense that he must be “less intact, even faintly destroyed” (133), and thus the reader is prepared to interpret Dick’s marriage as the cause of that destruction. Near the end of the novel, Fitzgerald recalls that romantic sensibility, having Dick perceive himself as someone who had “chosen Ophelia, chosen the sweet poison and drunk it” (336). In between these moments, though, Fitzgerald creates a largely realistic portrait of a man frustrated by the demands of both his wife and friends, feeling emasculated by his wife’s wealth, always planning but never completing a professional treatise, constantly attracted to the beauty of teenage girls, and handling it all by indulging in alcohol.
As Malcolm Cowley suggests, “we are never quite certain of the reasons for [Dick’s] decline” (Introduction 109), but the various causes offered by critics all seem to be valid contributing factors. Most blame Nicole’s illness and/or wealth (e.g., Merrill, Coleman, March, Callahan, Metzger, Onderdonk), although David I. Gottlieb makes the harshest judgment: “Nicole really devoured Dick, chewed him up, and spit out his bones” (374). Others point to Dick’s emasculation by American women in general (Price Herndl) or American culture (Fetterley), refusal to analyze his own short-comings (Boker), social-climbing (Kuehl), and desire to be loved (Lehan), or to the debilitating effects of “counter-transference” (Boker). The novel includes all of these elements, but I find that it particularly emphasizes Dick’s attraction to young women, and it this character flaw that provokes both Nicole’s later relapses and his own depression.

When Dick first meets Nicole, he is twenty-seven years old and she is seventeen, and he is particularly attracted by her youth; he thinks of her as a “young girl” (136) with “a moving childish smile that was like all the lost youth in the world” (153). When Dick meets Rosemary, he is thirty-four but is once again attracted to a seventeen-year-old, and he again comments on her youth: “You’re the only girl I’ve seen for a long time that actually did look like something blooming” (29). He even calls her “a lovely child” when they first kiss (74), and admits later that “When a child can disturb a middle-aged gent—things get difficult” (107). But Dick’s attraction to young women extends beyond Nicole and Rosemary. At other moments, he is fascinated by “the faces of all the girls [with] the same innocent expectation” (196), imagines an affair with a “peasant girl” (219), dances with a “young English girl” (248), and even kisses the fifteen-year-old daughter of a patient (213). I agree with Robert Stanton that Dick’s desire for youth functions metaphorically, making him “a symbol of America and Europe turning from a disciplined and
dedicated life to a life of self-indulgence, dissipation, and moral anarchy—a symbol of the parent
generation infatuated with its own offspring” (140). On a literal level, however, Dick’s desire makes him incapable of sustaining a mature relationship. He seemed averse to marriage even when beginning his career, as he found the “domestic gestures of Franz and his wife” to lack “grace and adventure” (151). And after years of marriage Dick admits to himself that “he had for many years pretended to a rigid domesticity from which he was drifting away” (192). Although he loves Nicole, he seems to resent the obligations of an adult relationship as well as her particular needs as his patient.

As Dick becomes increasingly unhappy, he begins to drink more frequently. A major change occurs, though, following Nicole’s most serious relapse. After hearing that Dick had kissed the young girl at the clinic, Nicole confronts him only to be told, “I had no relations of any kind with that girl” (210). Nicole has been through this situation before, both in terms of a man’s sexual relations with a teenage girl and his lying about it. Her father had denied the incest, and Dick had denied both his initial love for her and involvement with Rosemary. This incident recalls the basis of her original trauma, and, while attending a carnival with the children, Nicole ends up atop a Ferris wheel, laughing hysterically. She is specifically angry about his attempted deception—“Don’t you think I saw that girl look at you . . . Don’t you think I saw?”—and she confronts him just as she had when he first tried to deny his feelings for her: “It’s always a delusion when I see what you don’t want me to see” (213). Nicole is naturally angry that she is once again being betrayed and manipulated, but Dick places the blame entirely on her. The incident continues while driving back to the clinic as Nicole causes the car to crash, endangering everyone. Dick never admits his responsibility, either for kissing the girl or for his affair with
Rosemary. Instead, he feels increasingly strained by her behavior and decides to take a leave from the clinic.

From that point on, Fitzgerald records a rapid series of incidents that reveal Dick’s increasing alcohol use and depression. These passages are particularly compelling for the author’s ability to capture the various moods and behaviors that result from Dick’s drinking. Most often, Dick is belligerent and insulting, constantly provoking arguments and embarrassing those around him. He also experiences gaps in awareness, such as at a club when a disturbance arises and “he had a sense of having been the cause of it” (250). He feels “expansive moods” when drinking around the children (286), and he once becomes violent, hitting both a taxi driver and a police lieutenant. That encounter leads to a night in jail, which ends with his resolving to “be a different person henceforward” (260), and there are other times when Dick similarly feels a moment of remorse. When both a patient and his partner Franz confront him about drinking at work, Dick briefly assesses his alcohol use, but he finds himself guilty only of “indiscretion” and resolves to “cut his liquor in half” (283). After provoking an argument with friends, Dick similarly admits that he feels “badly about the evening” (306), but, again, he lacks the ability or desire to make any permanent change. There are other moments as well; he insults Mary North’s family, almost has a knife-fight with his cook, and has “Uncharacteristic bursts of temper” in which “he would suddenly unroll a long scroll of contempt for some person, race, class, way of life, way of thinking” (297). Nicole initially seems confused: “Why so many highballs? Why did you use your word spic in front of [Mary’s husband]? . . . this isn’t faintly like you” (290). At other times, she blames herself—“I’ve ruined you”—but also realizes that “we can’t go on like this” (297).
In his notes for the novel, Fitzgerald indicates that he perceived Dick as having “cured [Nicole]—almost mystically,” and that Dick leaves having “been used by the rich family and cast aside” (Bruccoli 13). The final novel, however, suggests more that Nicole has grown increasingly stronger over time and that Dick’s behavior becomes impossible for her to endure. Feeling “almost complete” (321) and with new “vistas” ahead of her, “peopled with the faces of many men, none of whom she need obey or even love” (326), Nicole has an affair with and eventually marries Tommy Barban. Dick’s drinking costs him both his job at the clinic and his marriage, but Fitzgerald ends the novel with a technique he calls the “dying fall” rather than with a clear resolution; as Maria DiBattista explains, “The hero does not die; he simply fades away” (39). The final perspective is Nicole’s, who has heard only that Dick is back in the United States, moving from one city to the next, and always writing a “treatise on some medical subject, almost in process of completion” (349).

**Conclusion**

Despite the novel’s initial sensationalism, then, Fitzgerald ultimately creates a multifaceted portrait of both schizophrenia and alcoholism, at least as far as those conditions were understood at the time. Like Woolf, he depicts both the experience and stigma of illness through multiple points of view, illustrating the effects of such conditions on both individuals and their loved ones, as well as the attitudes of both the general public and medical professionals. Taken together, these novels demonstrate how the modernists’ shift toward subjective perspectives enables a more well-rounded portrayal of mental illness than third-person narration could provide. Both novels are also flawed, in my opinion, in that the authors ultimately relegate the obviously ill character to a subordinate role in support of their main character’s own
development; Woolf presents Septimus’s suicide as a sacrifice to Clarissa’s need for empowerment, and Fitzgerald treats Nicole’s schizophrenia as one of the primary causes of Dick’s failure to fulfill his potential. The two authors also continue the modernist convention of using disability as a sign of a “defective” generation, and they expand the list of causes for that new state of affairs. To Conrad’s portrayal of anarchy, Woolf adds the trauma of the First World War and Fitzgerald proposes widespread decadence. The authors’ personal experiences also enable them to avoid the traditionally ableist point of view. Nicole’s fortitude and struggle to gain control over her life further provide an atypical portrayal of a character learning to live with a mental illness. Unfortunately, this struggle becomes a barrier to the couple’s relationship, which is an aspect of disability that also occurs frequently in modernist works. I explore this issue more fully in the next chapter, analyzing how physical impairments affect the characters’ pursuit of romance in both *The Sun Also Rises* and *Ulysses.*
Chapter Three:

Impaired Relationships: Physical Injury and the Pursuit of Romance

In addition to stylistic experimentation, modernism is known for the way authors portray their characters’ personal relationships in distinctly different ways than their predecessors had. While the Victorians emphasized marriage and family, some modernists depict romantic encounters as sterile, such as T. S. Eliot does in the *The Waste Land* (1922), or conflicted by the rise of the New Woman concurrent with a crisis in masculinity, such as many critics find in Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Others describe their characters’ sexuality more explicitly than authors had before, as illustrated by James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928).

Despite these changes, however, characters with disabilities are often portrayed in the same stereotypical ways they had always been, as either asexual or sexually deviant (Longmore “Screening” 72, McRuer 94). This tradition continues with Conrad’s asexual Stevie, who resembles a child more than a young man, and in the sexual danger posed by both Benjy Compton in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and Fury* (1929) and Lennie Small in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937). At the same time, many modernists break through these stereotypes to present their disabled characters as having the same types of “normal” sexual desire and behavior the other characters do. In some cases, disability may even facilitate intimacy, as Maren Linett finds in several works that feature blind characters. Blindness, Linett suggests, appears “conducive to romantic love” in that “being allegedly cut off from knowledge of the world grants one greater intimacy with a beloved” (28-29). Still other modernists portray
an illness or impairment as a barrier to intimacy, such as we saw in Septimus Smith’s inability to feel and in Dick Diver’s emotional collapse and divorce.

I want to challenge the typical readings of two works, however, in which critics routinely consider a character’s physical impairment as the cause of his or her inability to find love and sexual fulfillment. Regarding Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, most critics interpret Jake Barnes as feeling emasculated by the genital injury he sustained in the war. In his seminal study of the Hemingway canon, Philip Young argues that Jake bears another version of the same physical and psychological wound that affects the author’s other male protagonists, thus becoming in *The Sun Also Rises* “the hero emasculated” (85). Beginning with this assumption, some critics contend that Jake finds ways to compensate for his lost manhood. For example, Thomas Strychacz argues that “Jake watches others to compensate for his sexual impotency” (80), Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes suggest that Jake “must find a value system that will help to compensate for the void in his life caused by his wound” (248), and Turgay Bayindir contends that Jake “has to perform activities assigned to a ‘masculine’ signifier in order to make up for what he physically lacks” (141). Even Dana Fore, who approaches the novel through the lens of Disability Studies, accepts the perception of Jake as an “emasculated war hero” while arguing that he searches for a “viable identity” between disabled characters Count Mippipopolous and the bullfighter Belmonte (76). Other critics find that the novel depicts forms of sexuality that extend beyond the traditional heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. Mark Spilka, for instance, offers the examples of the “feminized” Jake and “mannish” Brett as evidence of Hemingway’s interest in androgyny (*Hemingway’s Quarrel with Androgyny* 200-08), while Richard Fantina describes Jake as masochistic and points out that “male heterosexual masochism represents to some a legitimate, alternative form of masculine sexuality” (84). A rare
exception to these views is that of Carlos Baker, who describes Jake as “truly masculine” and contends that “total sexual disability has not destroyed his manhood” (23).

In this chapter, I offer several reasons to challenge the assumption that Jake feels emasculated, beginning with the author’s own assertion that the character’s wound “was physical and not psychological . . . he was not emasculated” (“Interview” 18). I also discuss studies of real men who have retained or regained their sense of masculinity after acquiring similar types of disabilities, and I highlight the ways in which Jake’s emotions and behavior resemble theirs.

Instead of assuming that Jake feels emasculated, I suggest we read the novel just as Hemingway describes, with Jake perceiving his injury as a physical disability that prevents his having an intimate relationship with the woman he loves. Unfortunately, Hemingway’s mindset reinforces the notion that an inability to have intercourse means an inability to have a romantic relationship, sexual or otherwise, but it also allows for a concept of masculinity that moves well beyond sexual performance. While I do not interpret Jake as feeling emasculated by his injury, then, I do consider his physical condition to be depicted as a disabling one. In this sense, Hemingway aligns himself with the other modernists who present disability as an obstacle to romance.

The novel is also typically modernist in that Hemingway uses disability in a pejorative sense to characterize most members of his generation as “defective.” In addition to Jake having an injured body, Brett Ashley appears emotionally unstable, and both she and Mike Campbell exhibit symptoms of alcoholism.47 Furthermore, Robert Cohn has a broken nose, Count Mippipopolous bears arrow wounds, and Belmonte suffers from a painful fistula. More broadly,

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47 Describing Brett as emotionally unstable may understate her condition. Charles J. Nolan argues that she exhibits symptoms of borderline personality disorder, based on her use of alcohol, depression, irritability, unstable relationships, unstable self-image, impulsiveness, and discomfort with being alone. He also points to a more positive trait as a symptom, Brett’s ability to nurture others, noting that people with this disorder “expect that the ones they help will reciprocate” (113).
the prostitute Georgette observes, “Everybody’s sick,” including herself (23). Whatever the specific causes and natures of these conditions, disability once again serves as these authors’ metaphor of choice for the effects of living in an uncertain and disillusioning modern world.

The novel Ulysses, however, stands out from most other modernist works in that Joyce does not use disability to characterize his generation, although individuals with physical impairments appear sporadically throughout the novel. Instead of creating disability as an overarching metaphor, Joyce portrays these conditions as personal flaws in line with the other characters’ generally antiheroic qualities. Reversing the tradition of presenting heroes and heroines in idealized terms—as strong, brave, beautiful, virtuous, etc.—Joyce calls attention to the courage and honor of the ordinary men and women who manage to endure and enjoy life despite its hardships.

My discussion focuses on Gerty MacDowell, a young woman who walks with a limp and who generally receives the same treatment from critics that Jake Barnes does. That is, most readers assume that Gerty’s condition makes her somehow less womanly, pitiful, and destined for spinsterhood. Deborah Kent, for example, calls Gerty “a travesty of womanhood” and contends that, “Because of her disability, her efforts to lure a man are cruelly doomed” (52), while Vik Martina Plock similarly insists that “Gerty’s defect singles her out for a different future from the one desperately desired” (129); “The transformation awaiting her,” Plock suggests, “is the change from a young maiden into a vindictive and cynical old spinster” (129). As with Jake Barnes, some critics argue that Gerty attempts to compensate for her “defect.” Garry Martin Leonard takes this view, maintaining that Gerty “must surpass other women in appearance if she is to offset the ‘defect’ of her limp” (115), and Suzette Henke likewise
suggests that Gerty “compensates for bodily deformity by heightened pride in physical attractiveness” (“Nausicaa” 155).

As I will demonstrate, however, Gerty not only perceives her limp as less disabling than most critics do, she is successful in becoming the object of male attraction that she aspires to be. As a young woman in turn-of-the-century Dublin, Gerty has little choice in life other than to find a husband, but her fantasies alternate between having a loving marriage and having a man admire her sexually. Her culture, while not yet influenced by the New Woman paradigm, is modern in that feminine beauty has become a standard that can be “attained” through “self-regulation and consumerism” (Garland-Thomson “Integrating” 10). In attempting to look as attractive as possible, then, Gerty fashions her appearance according to the able-bodied standards she finds in popular culture representations, which includes trying to keep her limp concealed. Despite this impairment, however, Gerty remains confident in her superior beauty, and, after attracting the attention of Leopold Bloom, displays her condition to him without concern. For his part, Bloom initially reacts with pity at the sight of Gerty’s limp, but he ultimately retains his attraction to her and leaves the scene with the hope that the two will meet again. The critics’ contention that Gerty will likely remain unmarried because of her limp also needs to be considered within the context of a society in which over half of the female population was single (Gifford 6). Gerty is not the only unmarried woman in her group, and she attracts the attention of both Bloom and Reggy Wylie, indicating that she has at least as much a potential for finding a husband as her friends do. More generally, I think Joyce creates Gerty from a variety of sources in order to invalidate idealized standards of female beauty, and thus her limp functions less as a “disability” than an “imperfection.”

48 Don Gifford points out that “Women had little place in the public and political life of the city”; “If Dublin women did take to the streets in political protest,” Gifford notes, “it was not to fight for votes for women and women’s rights as their London sisters were doing, but for Home Rule for Ireland” (6).
Together, the two novels portray characters with impairments who are seeking romantic relationships in an era when any form of physical “difference” would seem to limit their chances for success. The works contrast in that Jake ultimately fails to obtain the love he wants, while Gerty succeeds in arousing a man’s sexual desire, but both provide examples of disabled characters who are both sexually desirable and desiring. In addition, the critics’ responses to the novels illustrate how their own preconceptions about disability inform their interpretations. Perhaps because cultural stereotypes still hold that people with disabilities are either asexual or sexually deviant, most critics seem unable to consider that Jake still feels “like a man” and that Gerty perceives herself as an attractive woman.

In discussing these gender issues, I rely on the characters’ own perceptions of what it means to be “masculine” or “feminine.” Most critics today recognize that such concepts are unstable ones, as Judith Butler points out: “[G]ender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts,” and it “intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (4). The issue becomes further complicated when we add disability to that line-up because men and women with disabilities are often deemed lacking in relation to the standards of their dominant culture. In reference to masculinity, Thomas J. Gerschick and Adam S. Miller point out that “The body is a central foundation of how men define themselves and how they are defined by others. . . . Men’s bodies allow them to demonstrate the socially valuable characteristics of toughness, competitiveness, and ability,” and thus the bodies of men with disabilities “serve as a continual reminder that they are at odds with expectations of the dominant culture” (183). Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asche point to a similar situation for disabled women:
[They] have not been forced to get married or to subordinate paid work or childbearing or housekeeping. Instead, they have been warned by parents that men only “take advantage”; they have been sterilized by force or by “choice,” rejected by disabled and non-disabled heterosexual and lesbian partners, abandoned by spouses after onset of disability and thwarted when they seek to mother. (29)

It is notable, then, that both Jake Barnes and Gerty MacDowell, despite their disabilities, position themselves favorably in relation to their cultures’ dominant standards of gender identity. In perceiving Jake as masculine in line with the hegemonic ideals of his time, my interpretation stands at odds with critics such as Debra A. Moddelmog who contend that the novel “brings traditional significations of gender and sexuality into conflict” (192). Noting that “society attempts to stabilize conduct, appearance, and desire by encoding the first two as masculine or feminine and the latter as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual,” Moddelmog argues that “Actions, appearance, and desire in The Sun Also Rises spill over the boundaries of these categories of identity and identification so that the categories become destabilized and collide with one another” (197). My own analysis, however, is that Jake demonstrates a sense of masculinity consistent with his culture’s ideals; he asserts control over social situations, appears stoic before others, and finds self-esteem in the traditionally approved arenas of work and sports. Hemingway also positions Jake in relation to Robert Cohn and Pedro Romero, respectively the novel’s models of either inadequate or exemplary masculinity. Jake clearly considers Cohn “unmanly” in the latter’s relationships with both his fiancée and Brett, and, in turn, Jake admires Romero for his ability to excel at bullfighting despite being injured. Jake does feel inferior in comparison to Romero, but it is Jake’s behavior, not his injury, that proves emasculating. In this
portrayal, then, the novel does not present various acceptable forms of masculine identities, but rather poses a hegemonic ideal by which individual men are judged.

Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell similarly accepts her culture’s definitions of femininity. She actively seeks instruction on proper appearance and conduct from magazine advertisements and novels, and then conceals her limp in order to meet those standards. When she transgresses the proscribed codes of conduct, she also manages to absolve herself of any impropriety by comparing herself favorably to less socially accepted female behaviors. Relying on the standards of femininity her culture designates, Gerty even castigates her girlfriends for what she perceives as their shortcomings, and generally considers her own beauty and behavior to be superior.

As a final point about the novels’ modernist qualities, both The Sun Also Rises and Ulysses portray characters managing to live their lives with a disability, just as Tender is the Night does with Nicole Diver. These novels thus stand in contrast to the “cure-or-kill mind-set” of much fiction (Snyder “Infinites” 180), as well as to the contemporary medical community’s focus on rehabilitation and cure. Indeed, modernist authors often give their characters conditions that are not fixable, and the characters are not always killed off, as Conrad’s Stevie and Woolf’s Septimus Smith are. Snyder points out that “Cure-or-kill story endings frequently connect to logics of eugenics where disabled people represent a soon-to-be eradicated group whose promised erasure will better society” (181). Of the texts I am considering, however, Conrad’s Secret Agent mocks eugenics theory, and none end with a restoration of social order. Indeed, the modernist era is a time of disorder, and thus most characters simply endure, however well or ill.

49 See also Mitchell “Narrative Prosthesis” (24).

50 Other examples of this trend appear in Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover and Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome (1911).
**Jake’s Wound**

Hemingway’s characters illustrate this trend toward endurance, but my analysis of *The Sun Also Rises* focuses primarily on the nature of Jake’s injury since that has been the subject of so much of the novel’s criticism. As I will demonstrate, Jake’s disability is physical, not psychological, just as his author contends.

In an interview, Hemingway responded to the suggestion that Jake was “emasculated precisely as a steer” with the comment,

> Actually he had been wounded in quite a different way and his testicles were intact and not damaged. Thus he was capable of all normal feelings as a man but incapable of consummating them. The important distinction is that his wound was physical and not psychological and that he was not emasculated. (18)

After giving a partial explanation of the wound, then, Hemingway insists that Jake’s condition was not a psychological one. Nevertheless, most critics begin their interpretation with the assumption that Jake feels emasculated. Richard B. Hovey seems to speak for many when he responds to Hemingway’s remarks with the comment, “No matter how stoic or brave, a man with such a disability must *feel* he is less of a man” (63, italics original). One problem with such analysis is that Jake is a fictional character, who can, therefore, have any sensibility his author wants him to have. More significantly, Hovey’s assumption about what a man in Jake’s condition “must” feel is contradicted by research in both masculinity and disability.

Several case studies demonstrate that men who become disabled, including sexually dysfunctional, usually retain a sense of masculinity, although most undergo a process in which they reevaluate previously held ideals. Of course, individuals respond to disability in a variety of ways, but studies of disabled World War I veterans indicate that “gender identity was not
invalidated even if longstanding views existed concerning the emasculation that followed
disability”; that is, “hegemonic masculinity was flexible, enabling wounded soldiers to embrace
new visions of selfhood that nevertheless often adhered to masculine ideals” (Gagen 538).
Comparing Jake’s experience with those of the men in these reports can help us better
understand how Hemingway’s character might perceive his own manhood.

My research includes studies of men with a wide range of injuries or diseases that
resulted in a loss of physical and/or sexual ability, such as testicular cancer, spinal cord injury,
paraplegia, quadriplegia, and other conditions. While individual responses varied, most men
reported a process of adjustment to their newly impaired body that involved concerns with
traditional notions of ideal masculine behavior. These concerns included both their own
desires—such as the need to feel in control of their body and environment, or to remain
physically active and employed—as well as the attitudes of others; that is, the men did not want
to be thought of as weak, pitiful, dependent, or less sexual. Although the process was often
difficult, and some continued to have negative feelings about their bodies or abilities, most men
maintained a strong sense of masculine identity.

In some cases, this sensibility remained within the framework of traditionally held values.
For example, as Gershick and Miller point out, “Hegemonic masculinity’s definition of
independence privileges self-reliance and autonomy” (188). One respondent to their study, a
quadriplegic who required full-time personal care assistants, still felt a sense of independence
and control because he directed all of his activities and the people who assisted him (188).
Another quadriplegic similarly achieved a sense of independence by considering his personal
care assistants as employees “in a business relationship that he controlled” (188).
We do not know what Jake’s experience was like immediately following his injury, but at the time we meet him, Jake demonstrates this masculine sense of control over both his own decisions and the activities of his friends. Mike seeks Jake’s approval for his and Brett’s participation in the fiesta, Bill looks to him for directions on the fishing trip, and all rely on his expertise in understanding the bullfight. Jake even takes responsibility for Brett’s affairs. When her telegram interrupts his trip to San Sebastian, Jake comments, “That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right” (243). The first man he refers to is Robert Cohn, whom Brett went “off with” without Jake’s knowledge. The second is Pedro Romero, and, although Jake accompanied Brett to meet the bullfighter, he tried repeatedly to talk her out of the affair. Both of these decisions were Brett’s, and yet Jake claims responsibility for them. While he seems disgusted at this point with both his and Brett’s behavior, Jake nevertheless demonstrates a stereotypically masculine attitude in claiming power over the situation.

This need for control also applies to the emotional stability of the men themselves. In the research on men with testicular cancer, David Frederick Gordon found that “In every case, the men . . . regarded keeping their emotions under control as very important” (255). Respondents made such comments as “I make the best out of situations, but I try to block out a lot of this,” or “you can’t let it bother you. . . . [Y]ou move on to other things” (257). One cancer patient admitted, “You pretend things don’t bother you but losing a testicle is part of one’s . . . manliness and so it’s a big thing”; “But,” he added, “I usually get over it” (258). These men further interpreted their situation as a test of courage, and Gordon notes that the “feeling of having been tested in a dangerous contest outweighed any challenges to masculinity that may have been created by the actual loss of a testicle or the loss of fertility”; that is, the men felt “they
succeeded by ‘toughing it out’ and not going ‘all scrambled’” (255). Wendy Jane Gagen’s study of injured World War I veterans also showed that “A desire to appear cheerful through adversity was a powerful masculine image for patients” (531). This desire, moreover, occurred in patients as well as family members and medical staff (531). Indeed, medical personnel “treated cheerful patients more respectfully” and considered “Those that deviated [from this behavior] as cowardly or childlike” (530). Like Jake, men in Gagen’s study also admitted to tears, but they expressed them only “in seclusion” (529).

Jake describes his own behavior as trying to “play it along and just not make trouble for people,” or trying “Not to think about it” (39). He discovers, however, that “It is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing” (42). To get through the nights, Jake resorts to leaving the light on, and it is only when he is in bed alone at night that he feels free to express his feelings (39). That release of tears is then cathartic; he feels better afterward and is able to fall asleep. Although facing his grief is healing, Jake exhibits a traditional sense of masculinity in remaining stoic in front of others. He demonstrates this attitude in the fishing scene when Bill Gorton begins to shy away from the discussion of the injury, and Jake encourages him to continue joking.

This refusal to play the victim enhances the contrasts that Hemingway draws between Jake and Robert Cohn, a man who ends the novel emotionally destroyed by his love for Brett. Unlike the pragmatic Jake, Cohn is a romantic who cannot accept that his affair with Brett “didn’t mean anything” (185). Indeed, it is Cohn’s emotional weakness that makes him the emasculated male of the novel, not Jake. As Jake points out, Cohn has taken a passive role in his previous relationships with women, initially being “married by the first girl who was nice to him” (12) and later “taken in hand” by another woman, Frances (13). Jake also describes a scene
when Frances publicly berates Cohn, and Jake wonders, “Why did he keep on taking it like that?” (58). Cohn’s emasculation becomes most apparent at the fiesta, when he continues to pursue Brett despite the presence of her fiancé and clear rejection of his attention. It is in this section of the novel that Hemingway draws an analogy between the behavior of the group of friends and that of the bulls, and he explicitly associates Cohn, not Jake, with the position of steer. After watching the animals’ interact, Mike verbally assaults Cohn, asking, “Is Robert Cohn going to follow Brett around like a steer all the time?” (146).

In addition to the emotional responses of maintaining control or appearing stoic, other traditional indicators of masculinity also played a part in disabled men’s ability to retain their sense of gender identity. For example, those who considered athleticism to be a sign of masculinity continued to participate in sports after incurring disabling injuries. Although some were no longer able to perceive themselves as “real” athletes, several found satisfaction in scuba diving or playing wheelchair basketball or softball (Gerschick and Miller 195, 198). Other men focused on their careers, gaining self-esteem either in recognition of their competence—“to have a career, to have my name on the door” (191)—or by fulfilling career goals, such as one participant who successfully became “a writer and an observer, a trained observer” (190).

Jake demonstrates both of these attitudes. He continues to be physically active, playing tennis, dancing, and going fishing. He also remains gainfully employed as a writer. After the night he spends crying over Brett, Jake recuperates in the morning partly by joining the other people heading off to their jobs, commenting, “All along people were going to work. It felt pleasant to be going to work” (43). Remaining active and gainfully employed thus allows Jake to feel “manly” in the same way he did before the accident.
While sports and work provided fields in which men with physical impairments could maintain their traditional notions of manhood, studies show that personal relationships often involved some reassessment of those values. Men who lost their ability to function sexually often retained a sense of masculinity by changing their views about sex, deciding that “intimacy and closeness were more important than intercourse” (Esmail 19). As Shaniff Esmail et al. note, “several researchers have demonstrated that physical dysfunction is not a major barrier to establishing close partner relationships; furthermore, having this connection plays a more important role in a person’s life satisfaction than physical function” (17). This response recurred in several studies. For example, one participant explained that manhood for him now involved his ability to be honest with his wife, be close with her, ask for and provide help, have a commitment, and follow through (Gerschick and Miller 189). Similarly, another found that “there’s so much more involved now than just the sexual” (Gordon 253). A study of women who married men with spinal cord injury demonstrated similar attitudes; as one respondent stated, “emotional intimacy was more important than the act. . . [T]he caressing, the fondling, the touch . . . the intimate kind of things . . . [were more important] than the actual intercourse” (Milligan and Neufeldt 127). For the men, emotional intimacy did not merely function as a substitution for sex, but as a new definition of what it meant to be masculine.

Jake demonstrates a similar perspective in his relationship with Brett. Throughout the novel, and despite how unhappy her affairs make him, Jake remains a close friend to Brett and the person she confides in. He even offers to help finance her divorce so that she can marry Mike, and he rushes to comfort her after her breakup with Romero. Indeed, their emotional intimacy is so strong that Brett considers him her only “friend in the world” (65).
While such emotional connections were important, the men in these studies also reported a desire for physical contact and a flexibility in their attitudes toward sex. For example, some men redefined masculine sexual behavior by, as one man put it, being “willing to do things in a nontraditional way,” while others focused less on their own pleasure and took pride in their ability to satisfy their partner (Gerschick and Miller 200, 190, 194).

Jake similarly displays a desire for physical contact. When he is riding in the cab with Georgette, he puts his arm around her and only withdraws when she touches him. In the first taxi scene with Brett, he also embraces and kisses her. Jake even seems surprised when she stops the encounter, asking, “What’s the matter? . . . Don’t you love me?” (33-34). He is clearly more comfortable with the sexually charged moment than she is, and some critics have also suggested that the couple engages in some form of sex in a later scene. When he is lying face down on the bed and she begins to comfort him, there is an ellipsis followed by the phrase “Then later,” and Jake reports feeling better (62).51

On the other hand, Hemingway’s extra-textual comments about the genesis of the novel indicate that he believed neither physical closeness nor alternative forms of sex would serve as a replacement for intercourse. In a letter to his editor, Hemingway explains,

I wondered what a man’s life would have been like . . . if his penis had been lost and his testicles and spermatic cord remained intact. I had known a boy that had happened to. So I took him and made him into a foreign correspondent in Paris, and, inventing, tried to find out what his problems would be when he was in love with someone who was in love with him and there was nothing that they could do about it. (Selected Letters 745)

51 Fantina observes that their “position—Jake with his back to Brett—can suggest either the manual manipulation by her hand or Brett’s anal penetration of Jake” (93). Chaman Nahal claims that “Jake receives and Brett gives him a perverted sexual satisfaction” (44), although the term “perverted” is obviously a subjective judgment.
Jake’s repetition of this concept in his question to Brett, “Isn’t there anything we can do about it,” and his own response, “there’s not a damn thing we could do” (34), indicate that he interprets his condition as an irresolvable barrier between them.

Brett’s continual involvement with other men, however, points to the relational aspects of both masculinity and disability, and to an area in which it is difficult for Jake to handle his condition. Gordon notes that women’s responses to male sexual dysfunction were often key in men’s ability to cope; that is, men often relied on “their wives or lovers to treat them as still desirable sexual beings” (262). This reliance appears not only in relation to sex itself, but also to men’s feelings about their body’s appearance. Gordon found that, “Although the physical losses experienced by these men did not result in them feeling less masculine, the surgeries and treatments did have negative effects on their thoughts about their bodies” (256). One survivor of testicular cancer commented that when he looked in the mirror, “I couldn’t stand what I was seeing,” and that his “whole ability to get through it . . . was because of [his wife’s] support and that feeling of . . . nonchanging love regardless of physical condition” (Gordon 253-54). Gagen also reports that injured World War I soldiers expressed anxiety over the appearance of their damaged bodies, describing them as “somewhat grotesque,” “not beautiful to look at,” or “a ghastly disfigurement” (532-33).

Jake similarly recounts looking at himself in a mirror before eventually breaking down into tears, demonstrating his concerns about his physical appearance. Nevertheless, Brett still treats Jake as a sexually attractive man, and her reaction would enhance his sense of masculinity. When she stops him from kissing her, she explains, “I can’t stand it,” and insists, “I simply turn all to jelly when you touch me” (33-34). Brett’s remarks indicate that she feels sexually aroused by him but also frustrated that he cannot provide her with the sexual fulfillment she desires. As
the studies mentioned above indicate, though, Jake may be somewhat correct when he considers, “Probably I never would have had any trouble if I hadn’t run into Brett” (39). He undoubtedly would have had some “trouble” adapting to his changed body and the loss of functioning caused by his injury, but falling in love with a woman who was, herself, emotionally damaged impedes his ability to cope. Jake stands by as Brett engages in a series of affairs, and his lowest moments—crying at night, feeling “blind” with jealousy (105), and betraying his own code as a bullfight aficionado—occur because of his love for her.

In addition to the experiences of disabled men, Jake can also be compared to men in general during his era who had begun to define their conceptions of masculinity in terms of sexual preference. George Chauncey points out that while “both sexual aggressiveness and sexual self-control—as well as the ability to propagate and support children—had served as markers of manliness,” by the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, “Middle-class men increasingly conceived of their sexuality—their heterosexuality, or exclusive desire for women—as one of the hallmarks of a real man” (117).

Jake’s response to the gay men in the bar—“Somehow they always made me angry” (28)—exemplifies this perception, as he reaffirms his own manhood by distinguishing himself from homosexuals. Ira Elliott correctly points out that Jake “objects not so much to homosexual behavior” but to the performance of gender-crossing, “to ‘femininity’ expressed through the ‘wrong’ body” (80). Yet I disagree with Elliott’s assessment that Jake is angry in this scene partly because he is displacing his own self-hated onto the homosexual for having lost his “signifying phallus” (83). As both Chauncey’s and Michael S. Kimmel’s studies suggest, Jake’s attitude was indicative of the early-twentieth-century male’s attempt to “define themselves in opposition to all that was soft and womanlike” (Kimmel 69). Kimmel adds that “the emergence
of a visible gay male subculture in many large American cities at the turn of the century gave an even greater moral urgency to men’s flight from being perceive a sissy. . . . [A]ny manner of behavior or action that was reminiscent of these inverts might be a man’s undoing” (83). This sensibility explains Jake’s desire to “swing on one, any one” of the homosexuals (28); that is, to act “manly” in order to distinguish himself from those behaving “unmanly.” The conversation between Bill and Jake later in the novel reinforces this interpretation. When Bill tells his friend, “I’m fonder of you than anybody on earth,” he adds, “I couldn’t tell you that in New York. It’d mean I was a faggot” (121). Because New York has a visible gay subculture, Bill feels that he would have to refrain from displaying any similarity to homosexuals in order to prove his manhood. At a distance from such an environment, however, that need disappears; the men do not feel the need to demonstrate heterosexuality in order to feel masculine.

As a final point about critical analyses, I argue that the tendency to perceive Jake’s wound as a symbol is a subjective judgment. While we cannot know Hemingway’s intention, readers have been trained throughout literary history to interpret bodily impairment as a metaphor for social ills. If we perceive Jake, the other male characters, or that entire generation of men as feeling emasculated, then Jake’s impaired body seems an obvious symbol. But Sharon Snyder points out that Jake himself refuses to make it one. Snyder highlights the conversation in the fishing scene, in which Jake describes his injury as “an accident” and Bill suggests he “work [it] up into a mystery. Like Henry’s bicycle” (SAR 120). Snyder suggests that, “While Bill would reference [Henry] James’s accident as a humorous example of literary myth-making,” Jake “insists on physically different bodies as a social reality, not as an opportunity for metaphor” (175). Snyder might also have pointed to the Italian colonel’s comment that Jake has “given more than [his] life” (39), a remark that Jake finds “funny” enough to frame. Jake
essentially thinks of his injury as he does life in general: “I did not care what it was all about. All
I wanted to know was how to live in it” (152). Unlike those who seek meaning in the injury, Jake
stays focused on the realities of his day-to-day existence.

If we can accept that Jake has managed to retain his sense of masculinity, then we can
approach his character in the way Hemingway describes, as a man living with a physical, rather
than psychological, disability. Because he cannot have sexual intercourse, Jake believes he can
offer Brett only friendship and thus begrudgingly stands by as the woman he loves moves from
one relationship to another.

For her part, Brett seems to be in love with Jake, but being with him only leaves her
sexually frustrated. Yet his condition is not the only cause of her behavior. Brett’s “own true
love” died in the war from dysentery, and she then twice married men she did not love (46). Her
second husband returned home so traumatized that he threatened to kill her, forcing Brett to
remove the shells from his gun each night after he had gone to sleep (207). Now waiting for a
divorce, Brett is engaged to Mike Campbell, an alcoholic and self-described “bankrupt” (196),
who accepts her relationships with other men. He knows that “Brett’s had affairs with men
before” because “She tells me all about everything” (147), and, during the course of the novel,
she engages in two more, one with Robert Cohn and one with Pedro Romero. At the end of the
novel, Brett is planning to return to Mike because “He’s so damned nice and he’s so awful. He’s
my sort of thing” (247). The fact that Brett continues to marry suggests that she wants a
committed relationship, but her repeated affairs and alcoholism—Jake calls her a “drunk” (46)—
indicate her status as another of the novel’s characters “disabled” by the war. The death of her
first love, Lord Ashley’s violence, and Jake’s wound are all attributed to the war, and they have
left Brett traumatized and, like Jake, searching for a way to endure the chaos of the post-war era.
Although Brett’s affairs cause Jake considerable despair, he seems otherwise to find enjoyment in life through both work and friendships. In particular, Jake takes pleasure in attending bullfights, where his appreciation for the event has earned him insider status as an aficionado. It is at the end of the fiesta, however, when I find him to demonstrate a sense of emasculation.

In Jake’s description of Romero, Hemingway sets the matador in contrast with the older Belmonte, whose legend for greatness has grown beyond any abilities he ever possessed. Now, suffering pain from a fistula, Belmonte disappoints the crowd, and thus disability again appears as a disruptive force in the novel. Belmonte’s inadequate performance, however, highlights Romero’s ability to excel despite his own injuries. The night before, Romero had been severely beaten in an assault by Cohn, yet he displays expertise and courage in the bullring, giving a performance that Jake describes as “a course in bull-fighting” (223). Rather than being exhilarated, however, Jake emerges afterward feeling “like hell” and getting “drunker than I ever remembered having been” (227). In addition to bullfighting, Romero has given what for Jake is a course in true manhood, and Jake can only consider his own behavior inferior. By introducing Brett to the young matador, Jake has betrayed his own values, and it is this self-betrayal, rather than his injury, that leaves him feeling emasculated.

At the end of the novel, Jake comforts Brett after her breakup with Romero, and he addresses his wound again in their final scene together. When Brett laments, “Oh, Jake, . . . we could have had such a damned good time together,” he clarifies his interpretation of her remark by noting a nearby policeman in the act of raising his baton (251), a phallic display that signifies his own lack of sexual ability. I agree with Spilka’s contention that Jake’s response, “Yes, . . . Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (251), means that Jake considers it “foolish to consider what could
never have happened” (“Death of Love” 36, italics original). Rather than fantasize about what might have been, Jake continues to insist on the reality of their situation as he perceives it, which is that his sexual dysfunction prevents him from satisfying Brett’s needs. Her own trauma, however, compounds their problem and leaves readers to question whether she could have found happiness with Jake, or if her own “disability” was itself too much of an impairment.

Imperfect Gerty

Unlike Hemingway, Joyce does not portray disability as a barrier to relationships. His focus in Ulysses on the heroic qualities of ordinary men and women, despite their flaws, establishes physical impairment as simply another of the difficulties of life which the modern hero or heroine both endures and overcomes. As critics have documented, the novel is structured along the lines of Homer’s The Odyssey, with Leopold Bloom standing in for the Greek epic hero. Gerty MacDowell’s role is somewhat equivalent to Homer’s Nausicaa, the princess who finds Ulysses stranded on a beach. Nausicaa, however, is only the first of many such icons that Joyce draws on in creating Gerty. By contrasting her with these images, Joyce rejects the idealized forms of feminine beauty depicted in both mythology and popular culture in favor of an imperfect beauty who struggles for identity amid the contradictory paradigms of modern culture.

The scene in Homer’s poem begins when a goddess appears to Nausicaa in a dream to tell her, “thou must marry soon, and must provide / Robes for thyself, and for thy nuptial train” because “Thy fame, on these concerns, and honour stand” (146). The princess and her attendants then head to the shore to wash the clothes and, while there, play a ball game that awakens the shipwrecked sailor. In a comic exchange, Ulysses stands nearly naked, covered by only a leafy branch, while pleading for Nausicaa’s help. He also hints at marriage, and she assumes he is the
husband foretold in her dream. The princess then takes Ulysses to her father, who helps the hero continue his journey.

Like many critics and translators, Joyce apparently noticed the difference between Nausicaa’s apparent modesty—she refuses to mention the subject of her marriage in front of her father—and the fact that she is a young virgin talking at length with a man “who was both unknown to her and also naked” (Minta 12). Stephen Minta suggests that, “For Joyce, the story of Nausicaa, as he inherited it, was one of evasion, a coy refusal to name what should be named, to recognize what should be recognized,” and thus “His own version would be explicit beyond the point of return” (10). In Ulysses, Leopold Bloom is nearing the end of his single-day adventures in Dublin when he sees Gerty seated on the rocks along Sandymount shore. Like Homer’s princess, Gerty is beautiful and anxious to marry. She also understands the importance of proper clothing, but instead of wearing royal garments, Gerty is dressed like “a votary of Dame Fashion,” a devotee of the style advisor in a woman’s magazine (455). For Nausicaa’s attendants, Joyce substitutes Gerty’s girlfriends, Cissy Caffrey and Edy Boardman, who are tending to their young siblings, and the ball that attracts the hero’s attention is now part of a children’s game. Like Ulysses, Bloom appears to the maiden as a “foreigner” and “dreamhusband” (Joyce 465), but Joyce transforms the meeting between the two into a much more explicit encounter in which Bloom masturbates while Gerty poses for him. As the scene reaches its climax, literally and figuratively, fireworks explode overhead, resulting in everyone on the beach joining the couple’s cries of “O! O! in raptures” (477).

In addition to making the encounter much more sexually explicit than Homer had, Joyce makes his “princess” more realistic, just as he does in transforming Homer’s Ulysses into the

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52 Our first, brief glimpse of Gerty occurred when the cavalcade passed by and she was blocked from seeing “what Her Excellency had on” (325).
beleaguered but nevertheless heroic Leopold Bloom. Unlike Nausicaa, who was “in form / And feature perfect as the Gods” (146), Gerty turns out to be “lame! O!” (479), and Bloom’s lust quickly turns to shock and pity. The sudden and unexpected presence of disability disrupts not only Bloom’s fantasy but the narrative itself, which transforms from a sentimentalized description of Gerty’s feelings and behavior to an unembellished transcription of Bloom’s confused response.

The moment when Bloom sees Gerty’s limp illustrates what Lennard Davis has called “a specular moment,” when “The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore,” the point at which a “person with an impairment is turned into a disabled person by the Medusa-like gaze of the observer” (12). In this case, Bloom’s gaze suddenly marks Gerty not merely as a woman who walks a certain way, “with care and very slowly” (479), or even one who walks less gracefully than he prefers, but as a disabled woman deserving of pity. If we step outside of Bloom’s perspective, however, we can see that Gerty is disabled only by reactions like his. There is no suggestion that her injury causes her pain, and it only somewhat restricts her mobility. On the strand, she steps carefully because there are “stones,” “bits of wood,” and “slippery seaweed” (479), but, otherwise, she apparently has no difficulty traversing the streets of Dublin to shop or handle errands for her father. Gerty’s limp simply makes less attractive a woman who otherwise meets all of her culture’s definitions of beauty. While we can infer other social barriers that a real woman like Gerty might encounter—such as opportunities for employment, access to medical care, etc.—Joyce’s focus is on his character’s desire to attract a man. As a young woman in turn-of-the-century Dublin, Gerty has few options in life other than
to marry, and she believes that achieving her goal requires looking as attractive as she can. Gerty’s limp is a “disability” only because it limits her “ability” to meet her culture’s ideals of feminine beauty.

Joyce’s choice of a limp as Gerty’s “defect” seems to have come from his relationship with Marthe Fleischmann, a woman he pursued an affair with a few months before writing the “Nausicaa” episode. The author first saw Fleischmann through his window, and, when he next observed her on the street, noticed that she walked with a limp. He wrote her several letters, including a postcard addressed to “Nausikaa” and signed “Odysseus,” and spent an evening with her on his next birthday. The author’s interest in Fleischmann, as well as the fact that she already had a boyfriend, indicates that a “lame” woman could still be considered attractive in that era, although Joyce obviously recognized his culture’s bias against women with disabilities. In my view, Joyce challenges those biases by presenting Gerty as a sexually desirable and desiring woman, and by having Bloom progress from his initial reaction of pity to a desire to meet her again.

Joyce also apparently borrowed another trait from Fleischmann, her fondness for sentimental novels (Senn 289). He not only gives Gerty this same attribute, he writes her part of the episode in what he called a “namby-pamby jammy marmalady drawery (alto là!) style” (Budgen 210) that makes the scene read like a sentimental romance, but one enhanced by Joyce’s own satirical tone and affinity for graphic details. He also makes the narrator sound as if it is

53 Regarding this culture, Gifford points out that, “Apart from marriage or a convent there were precious few careers open to [women]” at the time, and “Even if employed, women were generally regarded as ‘temporary employees’ and were not paid wages that would enable them to be self-supporting” (6).

54 After spending time alone with Fleischmann, Joyce told Frank Budgen that he had “explored that evening the coldest and hottest parts of a woman’s body,” and in June, Fleischmann’s lover, Rudolf Hiltpold, accused Joyce of causing her a nervous breakdown (Groden 235). For other commentary on this relationship, see Fritz Senn 289 and Karen Lawrence 253-55.
Gerty herself,\textsuperscript{55} trying to write her own romance with herself as the heroine, but repeatedly losing control over her story’s content.\textsuperscript{56} For example, a sentence that begins “Her hands were of finely veined alabaster with tapering fingers” quickly dissolves into “though it was not true that she used to wear kid gloves in bed or take a milk footbath either. Bertha Supple told that once to Edy Boardman, a deliberate lie” (452). My interpretation of such third-person commentary is that the narrator’s remarks reflect Gerty’s opinions and feelings. Gerty is trying to present herself as a modest woman who blushes at the slightest social improprieties and who longs for a relationship “like a big brother and sister without all that other” (474-75). What she actually reveals herself to be, however, is a woman who desires both emotional and sexual fulfillment.

This revelation forms the basis of my analysis. Gerty tries to behave like the chaste woman she knows she should be, but her encounter with Bloom ultimately allows her to overcome her culture’s moral prohibitions and indulge in the erotic behavior she desires. Gerty has been constrained not only by prejudice against women with disabilities\textsuperscript{57} and limitations on what women in general can hope to achieve, but also by the contradictory messages that her society sends regarding how women should comport themselves. Both Gerty’s church and the

\textsuperscript{55}This idea apparently came from Samuel Butler, who argues that \textit{The Odyssey} was actually written by “a Sicilian girl who portrayed herself in the figure of Nausicaa” (Müller 379). Müller contends that Joyce’s characterization of Gerty “relies on Butler’s account of Nausicaa much more than it relies on the Homeric original” (380). He finds that Gerty “shares with Butler’s Nausicaa an ambivalent attitude toward wealth and sumptuousness, a somewhat hypocritical notion of moral behavior, a profound respect for religious proprieties, and a marked proclivity for self-fashioning,” and argues that “The suggestion implicit in these parallels—that Gerty can be thought of as the covert authoress of her episode—[reveals] how Joyce uses her to represent or problematize crucial aspects of his own approach to writing” (380-81). Müller insists, however, that the voice speaking is not Gerty but “the sentimentalized third-person narration of a Victorian omniscient narrator” (389).

\textsuperscript{56}Margot Norris offers a similar interpretation: “The voice that speaks . . . makes best sense as a phantom narrator constructed by Gerty’s imagination to produce the language of her desire, the hypothetical discourse of her praises that she fears no one will ever utter” (39). My own argument, however, is that the narrative voice is not actually Gerty’s, just intended by Joyce to sound like hers, and, furthermore, that Gerty is more self-confident than most critics assume.

\textsuperscript{57}In analyses of Victorian fiction, for example, Martha Stoddard Holmes argues that most works tell us that a disabled woman must develop her identity outside the social world of courtship and marriage (“The Twin Structure” 223), while Cindy LaCom finds that the era’s representations of disabled women varied from “sexlessness” to “sexual deviance” (192).
magazines she reads have taught her to be the object of male adoration. Just as the men nearby pray to the Virgin Mary, Gerty imagines Bloom “worshipping at her shrine” (471), and just as the models in magazine advertisements dress and pose to attract male attention, Gerty attires and poses herself to appeal to the men she encounters. But while the church demands chastity, the magazines endorse seduction. Sentimental novels offer a third option, promising that “proper” conduct will attract a man who is . . . what? Gerty is not sure. At one point, she imagines a husband who “before he went out to business he would give his dear little wifey a good hearty hug and gaze for a moment deep down into her eyes” (458); at another time, she envisions a “nobleman” who would “have her put into a madhouse, cruel only to be kind” (474). Given the conflicting messages she receives, it is not surprising that Gerty ends up perceiving a stranger masturbating in the shadows as “that of which she had so often dreamed” (465). In fact, as I will demonstrate, what she has often “dreamed” of, or, more accurately, fantasized about, is less a husband than an admirer behaving precisely as Bloom does. When Gerty finally achieves *this* dream, the combination of Bloom’s lustful gaze and her romantic fantasy liberates her, making her feel “wild, untrammelled, free” (475).

To achieve this freedom, Gerty must first overcome the lessons on feminine behavior that she learns from fiction, and Joyce specifically parodies one of the novels he has her read, Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854). Several critics have suggested that Gerty’s namesake is likely Cummins’s heroine Gerty Flint, an abused orphan who is adopted into a loving family and taught Christian values. Over the course of the novel, as Gregg Crane describes, “Flint becomes a better person as she becomes more polite, better educated, and an improved housekeeper” (112). Flint also ends up happily married to her childhood beau, Willie Sullivan, the likely inspiration for Gerty MacDowell’s young admirer, Reggy Wylie.

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58 See, for example, Henke, Richards, Leonard, and Devlin “Romance.”
Joyce retains several aspects of The Lamplighter, including the heroine’s frequent blushing and crying, her despair over the childhood boyfriend who seems to have abandoned her, and the competition among young women for a husband. He even echoes specific phrases, such as the “meaning look” that Flint perceives in the eyes of a suitor (246), which becomes “there was meaning in his look” in Gerty’s perception of Bloom (465). As in his revision of Nausicaa, however, Joyce transforms the heroine’s body. Flint is often described as unattractive and, at one point, Willie relates her appearance to her ability to run: “nobody’d think of setting you up for a beauty; but when you’ve been running, and have rosy cheeks, . . . I often think you’re the brightest looking girl I ever saw” (79). Whereas Flint is unattractive until she runs, Joyce’s Gerty is beautiful until she walks. The novel further contains a message specifically applicable to Gerty, which is that it is admirable to walk “gracefully” but unseemly to appear “lame” (Cummins 335, 253).

Joyce also parodies the main lesson that Cummins’s heroine must learn: how to control her temper. Flint quickly acquires “the power of governing herself” to the point that she becomes “a wonder to those who knew the temperament she had had to contend with” (137). Joyce’s Gerty, however, manages to govern her speech but not her thoughts. For example, when Edy comments that Gerty is her baby brother’s “sweetheart” (452), Gerty interprets the remark as jealousy over the attention she has been receiving from the younger Reggy: “As per usual somebody’s nose was out of joint about the boy that had the bicycle always riding up and down in front of her window” (454). Although she is thinking, “that was why Edy Boardman thought she was so frightfully clever because he didn’t go and ride up and down in front of her bit of a garden” (454), Gerty stays silent: “She was about to retort but something checked the words on

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59 Gerty’s rephrasing here is an example of how her narrative unintentionally reveals the sexual nature of her thoughts. The image of a male “rid[ing] up and down in front of her bit of a garden” suggests a sexual act.
her tongue” (454). Similarly, when the baby spits up, “she was just going to tell [Edy] to catch it while it was flying but she . . . simply passed it off with consummate tact” (473). In Cummins’s novel, of course, Flint’s self-control becomes a sign of her virtue, while Joyce’s Gerty learns only to act in a manner that hides her true feelings.

Although I think Joyce uses Gerty’s temper primarily as a source of humor, some critics relate it to her disability. The moment consistently cited is when Cissy chases after the children’s ball and the narrator conveys Gerty’s derisive response. Critics only quote part of the passage, but it is helpful to analyze the moment in its larger context:

[Cissy] ran down the slope past him [Bloom], tossing her hair behind her which had a good enough colour if there had been more of it but with all the thingamerry she was always rubbing into it she couldn’t get it to grow long because it wasn’t natural so she could just go and throw her hat at it. She ran with long gandery strides it was a wonder she didn’t rip up her skirt at the side that was too tight on her because there was a lot of the tomboy about Cissy Caffrey and she was a forward piece whenever she thought she had a good opportunity to show off and just because she was a good runner she ran like that so that he could see all the end of her petticoat running and her skinny shanks up as far as possible. It would have served her just right if she had tripped up over something accidentally on purpose with her high crooked French heels on her to make her look tall and got a fine tumble. (467-68)

To most critics, the attention here is on Cissy’s physical ability in relation to Gerty’s disability. Garry Leonard, for example, suggests Cissy’s running “is particularly painful to the lame Gerty because this is one way Cissy is clearly superior to her” (111), and Deborah Kent similarly
describes Gerty as “bitterly jealous of her nondisabled friends” because she senses that Cissy “has all of the advantages when it comes to pursuing a mate” (49-50). Angela Lea Nemecek takes a more nuanced approach, commenting on both Gerty’s and Cissy’s behavior. “Although Gerty clearly envies Cissy’s athleticism,” Nemecek asserts, “she also distrusts and mocks her friend’s able-bodied display” because Cissy is enlisting her “able-bodiedness in an attempt to attract sexual attention” (196). However, while Cissy’s ability to run may aggravate Gerty, she actually expresses a competitive attitude toward any aspect of another woman that might provide a basis for comparison. In the full passage, Cissy’s hair, skirt, and legs all come under attack after the narrator has already told us that Gerty excels, or thinks she excels, in all three areas: she has a “wealth of wonderful hair,” a skirt that shows off “her graceful figure to perfection,” and “shapely limbs” (453, 455, 455). Gerty is likewise critical of Edy, variously labeling her “squinty Edy,” “an old maid,” and “Miss puny” (454, 469, 472). Instead of illustrating Gerty’s sense of inferiority or suspicion of normative behavior, I think the passage about Cissy’s running demonstrates Gerty’s confidence in her own superior beauty, as well as her annoyance over her friend’s attempt to capture Bloom’s attention. Gerty considers herself more attractive than either of her friends, and Bloom’s gaze confirms her perception. After watching Cissy’s performance, Gerty assures herself that “what he was looking at” is her own transparent stockings (468), and she is right.

Another similarity that Joyce takes from *The Lamplighter* is the heroine’s position in an abusive home, a point that may be related to Gerty’s limp. Just as Flint must endure the cruel treatment of a caretaker, Joyce’s Gerty must bear “deeds of violence” caused by her father’s “intemperance” (460), and there is a suggestion that the father’s drinking led to her injury.

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60 This situation allows Joyce not only to provoke sympathy for his character, but also to comment on the problem of domestic violence. Although Gerty loves her father, she insists that “the man who lifts his hand to a woman save in
Gerty constantly perceives herself as being in what amounts to a beauty contest competing with other women for the prize of a husband, and at intermittent moments, she gives various reasons for her inability to excel. Initially, she blames her social class and lack of education:

Had kind fate but willed her to be born a gentlewoman of high degree in her own right and had she only received the benefit of a good education Gerty MacDowell might easily have held her own beside any lady in the land and have seen . . . patrician suitors at her feet vying with one another to pay their devoirs to her.

(453)

In the second instance, Gerty blames her situation directly on her father’s drinking:

Had her father only avoided the clutches of the demon drink, . . . she might now be rolling in her carriage, second to none. Over and over had she told herself that . . .

(460)

In a later passage, the one most often quoted by critics, Gerty identifies her limp as her sole disadvantage:

. . . but for that one shortcoming she knew she need fear no competition and that was an accident coming down Dalkey hill . . .

(474)

In interpreting Gerty’s feelings about her ability to attract a husband, we must either find these reasons to be completely unrelated or to have a common link, and we can establish one through the way of kindness deserves to be branded as the lowest of the low” (461). However delicately worded, the comment reads as serious social criticism concerning a problem that Joyce’s wife had experienced (Shelton 90).

Norris similarly characterizes the situation as a “beauty contest.” Noting the allusions in “Nausicaa” to the Trial of Paris, Norris argues that the mythological countertext prompts us to “reexamine the great mythic beauty contest that is the prototype for the most resistant sexist rituals in our own society, the Miss American Pageant and the Miss Universe Contest”; the embedded Trial of Paris “dramatizes that the internationalization of the myth’s desires by modern women and the men who install themselves as judges of their desirability is tragically ironic because it is served by a primordially corrupt model of the judgment of beauty” (48-49).

Gerty is probably thinking here of the heroine in *The Lamplighter*, who receives a good education and is revealed near the end of the story to be the daughter of a gentleman.
Gerty’s father. His own socioeconomic class would be the reason she was not “born a gentlewoman,” and he would be the one who did not provide her with a “good education,” the two things that would have attracted suitors. The second section refers directly to the father; his drinking inhibits her ability to be “second to none” by somehow making her seem socially inferior. The third passage mentions only the accident, and it can be connected to the first two only through the father. That is, either Gerty’s only competitive disadvantage now stems from a completely different cause—a random accident that caused her limp—or her father’s drinking led to the accident. This interpretation is further enhanced by Joyce’s choice of a temperance retreat as the church service that continually diverts Gerty’s attention from Bloom.

On the other hand, these connections seem tenuous, and it is characteristic of Gerty both to contradict herself and to compile all the reasons she can think of when considering any problem. She does so when criticizing Cissy’s hair, skirt, and legs, and, as we will see, she enacts a similar process when absolving herself of behaving like the immodest “skirt-dancers and highkickers” (476). If we consider her class status, lack of education, father’s drinking, and limp as isolated issues, however, then her limp becomes less important, at least from her perspective. Instead of being, as critics routinely consider it, the primary reason she is distraught and unable to find a husband, her limp becomes only one factor among many.

My interpretation is that Gerty realizes her limp puts her at a disadvantage in the competition for a suitor, but she does not perceive it as prohibitive. Gerty knows she is beautiful, and she purchases the clothing and cosmetics she reads about because she believes they make her more attractive. As Nemecek points out, “Like the non-disabled Irish woman of her time, Gerty engages in the ‘career’ of self-beautification,” but Nemecek also argues that Gerty “maintains some distance from the project of normative femininity” (194-95). As examples, she cites
Gerty’s response to Cissy’s running and her refusal to adopt “the conventional role of caretaker” that encumbers her friends throughout the episode (196). While the depiction of a woman resistant to her culture’s insistence on able-bodiedness is certainly appealing, I do not find textual support for that interpretation. Gerty is clearly uninterested in the children, even annoyed by them, but she enacts her culturally approved role as a maternal figure in both her care toward her mother and her stance toward Bloom. In her own home, Gerty acts “just like a second mother” in treating her own mother’s headaches (461-62), and she perceives her actions with Bloom in line with a woman’s duty to be a “Comfortress of the afflicted” (466). Furthermore, instead of rejecting normative standards of femininity, Gerty embraces all of the aesthetic criteria that the magazines project. She enhances her brows with “eyebrowleine” because “Madame Vera Verity, directress of the Woman Beautiful page of the Princess novelette” had “advised” her to (453), dresses in blue because “it was expected in the Lady’s Pictorial that electric blue would be worn” (455), and sports the latest styles in hats and shoes (455). And she conceals her limp because, as Davis suggests, “it remains unrepresented by beauty tip columnists” and is, therefore, “not ‘feminine’” (129). Gerty not only fully ascribes to her culture’s definitions of feminine beauty as presented in magazines, she uses the opportunity on the strand to simulate the seductive pose that the able-bodied models assume.

It is through this parallel that Joyce moves away from the modesty of Nausicaa and propriety of Flint to reveal Gerty’s sexuality, and he enhances the analogy by making Gerty’s behavior similar not only to popular advertisements, but to more transgressive images of women as well. One of the products Gerty uses is Larola skin cream, which she refers to by its marketing slogan “queen of ointments” (452). As Thomas Karr Richards points out, this product was sold through a series of advertisements featuring what became known as the “seaside girls,” an image
that Bloom also references (484). These pictures commonly depicted a young woman at the seashore, posed erotically as an object of male desire. Examples include a woman who “lifts her arms to adjust her hair and strikes, in a swimsuit with low bodice and exposed legs, a cheesecake pose”; a sleeping woman lying with “one hand pulling up her dress to reveal a crumpled segment of underwear”; and a woman floating, “exposed to the waist under the scrutiny of bobbing male heads” (Richards 768-69). Joyce similarly situates Gerty on the shore and under the “scrutiny” of a male admirer, but it takes her a while to adopt the bold stance of the Larola models. When she first lifts her skirt “a little but just enough,” it is only to kick the ball (463), but she then takes delight in the realization that Bloom saw her, and she begins to swing her legs so that he will notice her new shoes and stockings (465). After that point, Gerty swings her legs faster and faster, which I interpret as a combination of nervous excitement and sexual arousal, but eventually she adopts a stance like that of the “seaside girls”; she leans back, catches “her knee in her hands,” and reveals “all her graceful beautifully shaped legs” (476). In Gerty’s posing, Joyce thus replicates the figures in these advertisements, but more than reproducing the image, he completes the fantasy the pictures create. The advertisements were aimed at women, effectively suggesting that if they use the proper skin care and reveal their underclothes, then they, too, will be the object of male desire. The concept works for Gerty; she uses the product, poses accordingly, and Bloom responds by masturbating.

In addition to presenting Gerty as a seaside girl, Joyce references two other images that were similar but less socially acceptable, those appearing in mutoscope reels and photographs. While the Larola advertisements were widely distributed, mutoscope reels designated for “men

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63 For another discussion of the “seaside girl” image, see Davis, 132-37.

64 Gerty’s resemblance to the seaside girls also subverts the era’s notions of fitness. Ironically, the advertising images arose from the culture’s “new emphasis on outdoor physical fitness for women” (Richards 768), an emphasis that, under the era’s eugenical standards, would have excluded those who walked with a limp.
only” featured models in similar poses. Bloom references the reels when recalling Gerty’s body after their encounter: “A dream of wellfilled hose. Where was that? Ah, yes. Mutoscope pictures in Capel street: for men only. Peeping Tom. Willy’s hat and what the girls did with it” (480). The mutoscope was an early form of cinema, and Philip Sicker identifies the reference to “Willy’s hat” as, most likely, “a series of pictures of girls in short frocks engaged in kicking at a hat which was held above their heads, there being at each attempt a liberal display of underclothing” (“Alone” 827). The image is not only similar to Gerty’s later behavior, it also recalls the earlier moment when she lifted her skirt to kick the ball.

Gerty would not have seen the mutoscope reels, but she has heard of the third image that Joyce invokes, which, again, depicts women kicking their legs and exposing their underwear. In this case, the pictures not only call attention to the dubious line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (and bodies), they also provide a clue to Gerty’s thoughts about sex. That is, despite the sentimental nature of her fantasies, Gerty has apparently been imagining physical relationships as well. One of Gerty’s friends has told her about “a gentleman lodger” who had “pictures cut out of papers of those skirt-dancers and highkickers and she said he used to do something not very nice that you could imagine sometimes in the bed” (476). Joyce’s syntax here implies that Gerty, as well as the lodger, is lying “in the bed” imagining, which raises the possibility that she has envisioned not only the lodger’s act but her own role as the seductive model. This suggestion gives new meaning to Gerty’s perception of Bloom as “that of which she had so often dreamed” (465); the form of sexual encounter she has with Bloom is very near the ones she has imagined.

The prospect of Gerty’s lying in bed fantasizing also suggests that she masturbates, a conclusion that Cynthia Hornbeck draws from another passage. Noting Gerty’s embarrassment
with her priest, Hornbeck asks, “what other ‘voice of nature’ could make her blush ‘up to the roots of her hair’ when she confesses it?” (99). Gerty also has a photograph of “a young gentleman . . . offering a bunch of flowers to his ladylove,” which she often gazes at “when there for a certain purpose” (462). This “purpose” is left vague, but, as she looks “dreamily” at the picture, she begins touching herself, feeling “her own arms that were white and soft” (462). In the scene on the strand, then, when Joyce describes Gerty’s blush as “the warm flush, a danger signal always” (463), he is apparently indicating the flush of sexual arousal that she has experienced in the past.

To progress from “seaside girl” to pin-up model, however, Gerty must overcome her culture’s prohibitions against such immodest behavior. Once she realizes the similarities between her situation and the models’—she is swinging her legs and exposing her underwear while a man looking at her is doing “something not very nice” (476)—she begins searching for excuses for her conduct. Beginning with a circular argument, Gerty decides that “this was altogether different from a thing like that because there was all the difference,” and then finally manages to form a justification: “because she could almost feel him draw her face to his and the first quick hot touch of his handsome lips” (476). In effect, Gerty decides there is “all the difference” because, in her mind she is not merely posing at a distance for a man’s pleasure but is “almost” having a culturally approved physical encounter that, moreover, would involve her pleasure as well as his. From there, Gerty gets on a roll, next finding a loophole in her understanding of Catholic doctrine: “there was absolution so long as you didn’t do the other thing before being married” (476). As her rationalizations continue, Gerty considers not only her behavior but also her desire, which she justifies by noting that her girlfriends have felt it too: “Cissy Caffrey too sometimes had that dreamy kind of dreamy look in her eyes so that she too, my dear, and Winny
Rippingham so mad about actors’ photographs” (476). Finally, she excuses her arousal by blaming it on menstruation: “besides it was on account of that other thing coming on the way it did” (476). Essentially, Gerty moves through every type of excuse she can think of to absolve herself because she knows she has crossed a moral boundary. Eventually, however, Gerty is able to enjoy the purely physical nature of the encounter even while admitting that she and Bloom are being “immodest”: “she wasn’t ashamed and he wasn’t either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn’t resist the sight of the wondrous revealment half offered like those skirtdancers behaving so immodest before gentlemen looking” (477).

I agree with Philip Sicker that the descriptions of Gerty’s behavior at this point indicate she experiences an orgasm, as well as with his argument that Gerty controls and receives pleasure from her exhibitionism. As Sicker points out, when Gerty “leans further and further backward, . . . she is ‘trembling in every limb,’” and “the pressure of her ‘nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin,’ contributes to an orgasm” (“Unveiling” 93). Sicker also notes that Gerty is “acutely aware” of her audience and takes pleasure in “her power to tantalize Bloom through veiled bodily disclosure” (94, 95).65

The excitement of Bloom’s lustful gaze and her own physical arousal also leave Gerty feeling more self-confident, and here Joyce invokes another icon of feminine beauty, W. B. Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan. When Gerty departs, the narrator states that she “drew herself up to her full height” and walked away “with a certain quiet dignity,” even though she is obviously aware that Bloom can see her limp (478-79). I agree with Plock’s observation that Joyce stages

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65 Sicker references the strong resemblance between Havelock Ellis’s description of a woman becoming self-aroused by swinging her legs, and Joyce’s portrayal of Gerty’s actions. His main point is that “Joyce grants his protagonist the erotic self-awareness that Ellis denied his subject by endowing her with exhibitionistic agency and visual pleasure” (“Unveiling” 94), but I am less convinced in Sicker’s contention that Gerty takes pleasure in “her own carefully concealed detection of his aroused, responsive physical presence” (95). I read her furtive glances as a coy maneuver to verify that Bloom is still watching her.
the revelation of Gerty’s limp as “the reversal of the proud walk that so conspicuously distinguished Yeats’s female nationalist symbol” (120). In Yeats’s play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the title figure first appears as an old woman, but after convincing a young man to delay marriage and fight for Ireland’s independence, she transforms into “a young girl” with “the walk of a queen” (127). Plock rightly concludes that Gerty’s exhibitionism becomes a “critique of the use of nationalist messages and icons whose seductive power can become a form of political manipulation,” but I disagree with her negative description of Gerty as “the crippled version” of Cathleen (129). My own view is that Joyce prefers the imperfect Gerty over the idealized Cathleen, and that he recalls this moment of transformation in order to subvert that iconic image in the same way he has those of Nausicaa, the Virgin Mary, Gerty Flint, and the seaside girls.

Although Gerty feels liberated, however, Joyce’s portrayal of a disabled woman who finds empowerment through imitating able-bodied sex objects is troubling for at least two reasons. First, Gerty is forming her identity based on one assigned by men, and second, she feels free to display her limp only after she has posed as a nondisabled woman. While both reasons can be attributed to her culture’s prejudices, I think her delight in objectification can be viewed in line with the burlesque dancers she mimics. Maria Elena Buszek has studied the transition of these dancers from stage actresses to pin-up models, noting their use of the new photographic medium to promote both their productions and themselves as “celebrity figures” (147-48). Buszek contends that the resulting pin-up photographs represented their subjects as “not only self-aware sexual beings, but beings whose sexual identities [could] be self-constructed, self-controlled, and changing” (160).66 At first highly popular with both middle- and working-class audiences, the photographs’ appeal declined by the 1870s, mainly due to complaints about their corrupting influence upon “genteel culture” (159). Yet Buszek argues that, “Always peculiarly

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66 Notably, Cissy’s cross-dressing was also a feature of the burlesque pin-up (Buszek 151).
and emphatically herself, the nineteenth-century burlesque pin-up left a legacy for contemporary feminists in the acknowledgement and performance of her own power for sexual agency” (160).

Viewed in this sense, Gerty’s own burlesque show enables her to assert her sexuality and control its display, as well as to experience both the male desire she craves and her own sexual fulfillment. On the other hand, the empowerment she feels is, or theoretically will be, compromised by her concurrent fantasy of Bloom as a potential husband. What Gerty eventually wants, and will need to have for financial security, is marriage. Ultimately, Gerty fulfills Bloom’s fantasy, but he can only partially fulfill hers.

The other issue raised by Gerty’s performance is the fact that her seated position conceals her limp. As I will demonstrate, Bloom eventually finds lame-Gerty as sexually appealing as the ideal figure she first seemed to be. But in a non-diegetic sense, Joyce’s portrayal of Gerty’s walk as a surprising revelation provokes the question of whether her performance denies or reveals her as a sexually desirable disabled woman. Her situation resembles the real-life stance of Ellen Stohl, a woman with paraplegia who posed for *Playboy*. After being injured, Stohl wrote a letter to the magazine contending that she wanted to pose nude “to teach society that being disabled does not make a difference” (Schriempf 55). As described by Alexa Schriempf, the resulting article (1987) included pictures of Stohl with and without her wheelchair, but there is a distinction between the two groups: “In the porn shots, her disability is rendered invisible”; her wheelchair is absent and “there are no visible indications of her paraplegia” (56). Several critics find the pictures problematic because of this separation. Schriempf argues that Stohl’s disability “is divorced from her sexuality” (56), and she calls further attention to the fact that, as a disabled woman, Stohl is in a position “where she must not only fight to be the author of her own sexuality but also must establish a sexuality in the first place” (57). Addressing the same
photographs, Garland-Thomson contends that “the affirmation of sexuality that Stohl sought by posing nude in the porn magazine came at the expense of denying, through the powerful visual register, her identity as a woman with a disability, even while she attempted to claim that identity textually” (“Integrating” 20). While agreeing that the “visual segregation of Stohl’s sexuality from her disability” is problematic, Nemeck offers another point of view, finding that Stohl’s appearance “not only reveals that a disabled woman is a sexual being; it also forces onto an audience steeped in ableist assumptions the fact of their desire for a paraplegic woman” (183). The extent to which Stohl achieved her goal is unknowable, but *The New York Times* supported her point with the headline “Disabled Model Defies Sexual Stereotypes” (Cummings).

In my view, Joyce, too, is similarly demonstrating that a disabled woman is also a sexual being, while recognizing his culture’s biases. He illustrates the common perception in Bloom’s initial response to the sight of Gerty’s limp: “Poor girl! That’s why she’s left on the shelf and the others did a sprint” (479). Yet Joyce has already contradicted Bloom’s assumption, making his pity inapplicable to the moment. When Gerty’s friends repeatedly called her to join in watching the fireworks, she was “adamant” in her refusal: “She had no intention of being at their beck and call. If they could run like rossies she could sit so she said she could see from where she was”

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67 This reaction is similar to the one Bloom forms about the blind piano tuner. After imagining what it would be like to be blind, Bloom concludes that it must be “terrible”: “Poor fellow! Quite a boy. Terrible. Really terrible” (134). Many people assume that pity is an appropriate feeling toward someone with a disability, but as Jaeger and Bowman point out, it reduces the person “to an object of sympathy who is seen as unable to be a meaningful participant in society or to lead a fulfilling life,” so that even when persons with disabilities try “to reassure others that they may be perfectly content,” their efforts “are often to no avail” (22). Michael O. Jauchen demonstrates this issue when he turns Gerty’s own words against her. When Edy has hurt Gerty by asking “was she heartbroken about her best boy throwing her over” (471), Gerty first starts to cry but then calls attention to Bloom’s attraction to her over the others and assures herself, “they both knew that she was something aloof, apart in another sphere, that she was not of them and there was somebody else too that knew it and saw it so they could put that in their pipe and smoke it” (472). To Jauchen, Gerty’s claim of “aloofness” is actually a sign that “her lameness relegates her to the position of a social pariah” (90). Far from being a “pariah,” however, the text indicates that she spends considerable time with several girlfriends and has also received Reggy’s attention. Furthermore, she is correct that Bloom chose her over the others. Gerty is unhappy about not yet having a husband and about her father’s alcoholism, but she does not wallow in grief. Indeed, she demonstrates a profound capacity for overcoming sorrow: a look in the mirror mitigates her sadness over Reggy, the thought of her father’s singing overcomes her abhorrence of his violence, and a glance at Bloom alleviates the pain of Edy’s affront (456, 461, 472).
(475). Her decision to sit rather than leave was not a matter of being “left on the shelf” but of
defying her friends’ “beck and call,” of deriding their behavior as “like rossies,”68 and of taking
advantage of the “ability” she does have, to sit. Sitting is what she wants to be doing anyway so
that she can continue posing for Bloom.

Bloom is also incorrect in his assumption about how Gerty’s condition affects her
behavior. In his comment “A defect is ten times worse in a woman. But makes them polite”
(479), he insinuates that Gerty is desperate for human affection and, therefore, afraid to offend.
But she has made it clear that she is “not a one to be lightly trifled with” (472), and, having
received Bloom’s attention, she is ready to stand up to Reggy: “if ever after he dared to presume
she could give him one look of measured scorn that would make him shrivel up on the spot”
(472). Through Bloom’s initial responses, then, Joyce illustrates his culture’s biases against
women with disabilities only to reject them.

Bloom’s reactions to the sight of Gerty’s limp further signal a shift in power relations
between the two. Up to this point, Bloom and Gerty have enacted a scenario that critics have
conceptualized as the male gaze, which consists of men actively looking while women remain
passively looked at.69 Although Garland-Thomson distinguishes the gaze from staring, “an
intense visual exchange that makes meaning” (9), she notes that the male gaze “often achieves
the prolonged intensity of staring,” which can then function as a manifestation of dominance
(41). The revelation of Gerty’s disability, however, disrupts that scenario. Just as Gerty has
concealed her limp, so societies “have hidden away disabled people in asylums, segregated
schools, hospitals, and nursing homes”; thus, Garland-Thomson suggests, “When we do see the

68 The Oxford English Dictionary defines “rossie” as “A spirited, outspoken, or independent woman; (also) a hussy”
(“Rossie”). The irony, of course, is that Gerty is the one behaving most like a rossie.

69 For a discussion of the gaze in relation to this chapter, see Devlin “See Ourselves,” Sicker “Unveiling,” and
Müller.
usually concealed sight of disability writ boldly on others, we stare in fascinated disbelief and uneasy identification. . . . Such confusing sights both affirm our shared humanity and challenge complacent understandings” (19-20). In this case, Bloom must adjust his conception of Gerty as the idealized object of his scopophilic pleasure. After his initial response of pity, the sight of her limp seems to provoke this sense of “shared humanity,” and as he continues to stare at her, Bloom quickly assumes the subordinate position of the object under scrutiny: “Saw something in me. Wonder what. . . . Ought to attend to my appearance my age. . . . Still, you never know. Pretty girls and ugly men marrying. Beauty and the beast” (481). This evocation of a final iconic image of feminine beauty elevates Gerty’s status while denigrating Bloom’s, thus balancing the power relation between them, and the episode ends with his considering a return to the strand in hopes that they will meet again. Gerty’s limp has therefore only temporarily disrupted Bloom’s attraction to her, and it has allowed Joyce to position her “disability” in line with Bloom’s own “defects” and with the novel’s overall presentation of ordinary, imperfect people as modern-day heroes.

**Conclusion**

Considering Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell alongside Hemingway’s Jake Barnes reveals the contradictory nature of modernists’ views toward disability’s effects on personal relationships. While some authors continue the stereotypes of the past, most, like Hemingway, present their disabled characters as having the same types of sexual desire their able-bodied characters do, but they then depict disability as too large of an obstacle to be overcome. Others, like Joyce, recognize their culture’s prejudices against people with disabilities, but find such “defects” no more or less a flaw than any person naturally bears. As with all the modernist novels I have read,
disability still appears in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Ulysses* as a negative trait, but these authors’ depictions of their disabled characters as both sexually desiring and desirable suggests, at least, a reversal of the traditional perception that people with disabilities are either asexual or sexually perverse.

In the next chapter, I move from personal relationships to social ones and from mainstream modernism to the specific nature of African American modernism. In *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright uses the condition of blindness as both a character trait and a metaphor for relations between whites and blacks. Inverting the trope of invisibility that other African American authors employ, Wright moves this “disability” to the white population by portraying it as figuratively blind. The literally blind Mrs. Dalton then serves as a symbol of the dominant culture’s refusal to recognize the humanity of African Americans. In addition, the white population’s lack of vision has a reciprocal effect on blacks, and thus disability once again serves to mark the generation as “defective.”
Chapter Four: African-American Modernism and a Deadly Game of Blind Man’s Buff

So far I have been discussing aspects of what might be considered mainstream, or American and European, modernism, but several critics have also defined traits specific to African-American modernism, primarily in these authors’ incorporation of their culture’s blues, vernacular, and folklore. Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) offers an example of both this particular form of modernism and a depiction of disability, and it is through his incorporation of African American folklore that we can best understand the novel’s metaphor of blindness.

Native Son tells the story of Bigger Thomas, an African American teenager living in Chicago during the Great Depression. Confined to the city’s Black Belt and feeling his life restricted and controlled by whites, Bigger lives in a constant state of fear, anger, and shame that causes him to lash out at those around him. After taking a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family, Bigger accidentally kills their daughter, and he soon rapes and murders his girlfriend as well. Quickly arrested and convicted, Bigger appears at the end of the novel awaiting his execution yet having developed a new sense of self-awareness.

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70 According to Heather Love, “Efforts over the past several decades to imagine modernism as an expanded field have been remarkably successful. Female modernism, African American modernism, queer modernism, sentimental modernism, low and middlebrow modernism, and colonial, post-colonial, and anticolonial modernism have all been integrated into a renewed understanding of modernism (or modernisms, as it is often written)” (744).

71 Native Son features aspects of both mainstream and African American modernism. Bill V. Mullen, for example, finds that the novel “shows the influence of Surrealist painting, modernist language experiment, Freudian psychology, existential philosophy, migration sociology, and Marxism, each a reference point for Wright’s understanding of European and American modernism. It also uses African-American blues and folklore, a particularly African-American standpoint on urban environment, and a keen sense of African-American alienation to supplement modernism’s themes and ideas” (499).
One of the novel’s major themes is that African American violence occurs as a result of white oppression, and Wright characterizes this oppression as enabled by “blindness,” using the term to connote the refusal of whites to recognize the humanity of blacks. Mrs. Dalton’s literal blindness serves as a symbol of this condition, and Wright develops the concept through three aspects of African American folklore: the presence of a ghost (in Mrs. Dalton’s ghostlike appearance), the cunning and disguise of the trickster (in Bigger’s attempts to exploit the blindness of others), and the cruelty and bravado of the badman (in Bigger’s rebellion against this blindness).

By associating disability with the dominant culture, however, Wright deviates from another convention of African American literature, the trope of invisibility. While the latter refers to the state of the displaced Other, blindness in Native Son denotes its cause, thereby shifting the “problem” of disability from society’s victims to its persecutors. At the same time, Wright poses the blindness of whites as having a reciprocal effect on blacks. Black blindness appears in both Bigger’s inability to recognize the humanity of whites and in his and other characters’ efforts to ignore the harsh realities of their lives. In making blindness a shared condition, Wright also reverses the common conception of disability as a state of deviance and, in so doing, joins other modernists in characterizing his generation as “defective.”

Blindness as Metaphor

In using blindness as a metaphor, Wright is participating in a longstanding Western tradition. Indeed, in the catalogue of disability metaphors, blindness seems to be the most common, and its history extends at least as far back as the classical period. Idiomatically, one can be blind to the truth, go up a blind alley, turn a blind eye, or rob someone blind. One can also
experience blind faith, blind luck, or blind rage. Proverbially, the blind can lead the blind, causing both to “fall into the ditch” (*The Holy Bible* Matt. 15:14), and there is none so blind as those who will not see. On a rare positive note, Justice is blind, as is Love, but the latter concept can mean ignoring either a beloved’s minor or major flaws. Pierre Fontanier even considers blindness a catechresis, “an obligatory metaphor to which language offers no alternative”:

> Blindness must have at first referred only to the deprivation of the sense of sight; but he who does not clearly distinguish ideas and their relationships; he whose reason is disturbed, obscured, does he not slightly resemble the blind man who does not perceive physical objects? The word blindness came naturally to hand to also express this deprivation of moral sight. And how without these obligatory metaphors, without these catechreses, would one have succeeded in retracing these ideas. (qtd. in Schor 77-78)

Whether or not we agree with Fontanier’s assessment, the proliferation of sayings that reference blindness seem to support his contention.

In literature, literal blindness ranges from a form of punishment or accompaniment to insight, as in *Oedipus Rex*, to a cause for pity, as in *Ulysses*, and figuratively it is a quarterback’s blind side, a popular film teaches, that must be protected. More generally, Maren Linett observes, blindness in literature “is associated (mostly) with lack of knowledge and (occasionally) with uncanny knowledge, or insight,” although the latter may be considered a compensatory gift (28). In either case, Linett points out, “This association of blindness with

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72 See my chapter 3.

73 *The Blind Side* (2009), written and directed by John Lee Hancock and starring Sandra Bullock and Quinton Aaron.

74 According to Paul K. Longmore, in many stories, “God or nature or life compensates handicapped people for their loss, and the compensation is spiritual, moral, mental, and emotional”; thus blind people may be given “special
lack of knowledge implies the ableist assumption that the greater part of knowledge comes through sight” (28). Martin Jay’s study supports this point, as he finds an ocularcentrist attitude in Western culture from ancient Greece through the early twentieth century (Jay chapter 1). Jay’s main focus, however, is on the decline of this opinion in the works of twentieth-century French philosophers, which Linett connects to the modernists’ frequent use of blindness as a metaphor (30). Linett suggests that “The ‘inward turn’ of early twentieth-century literature . . . helps account for its fascination with blindness as a route to an exploration of consciousness and communion with a single other” (30). In both nineteenth-century novels and twentieth-century films, Naomi Schor also observes a frequent use of literal or figurative blindness in the construction of female characters, whose condition allows them to make the “proper object choice” in romance by ignoring the surface appearance of the “Beast” figure (101).

Wright’s usage of blindness in *Native Son* differs from these later works, however, in that he does not present blindness as either a pathway to inner consciousness or as a means of ignoring surface appearance in order to discover another’s moral integrity. Instead, Wright relies on traditional associations of blindness with ignorance. Several of *Native Son*’s characters employ fairly standard idioms, including “windows, like blind eyes” (173), “blind anger” (239), “blind emotion” (388), “blind will” (388), and the “blind play of social forces” (390), all suggesting a cause or effect of some form of ignorance. Blindness in these forms always indicates a flaw (of the characters or their environment), and some express regret for the condition once they have overcome it. Bessie Mears, for example, censures herself when she realizes how Bigger has used her: “I didn’t want to see it before. . . . But you got me into this murder and I see it all now. I been a fool, just a blind dumb black drunk fool” (230). Similarly,

insights into human nature,” but such compensation “is a ‘gift’ to handicapped individuals who responsibly deal with their ‘afflictions’” (“Screening” 71).
when Jan Erlone comes to understand why Bigger threatened him, he too blames himself: “I see now. I was kind of blind . . . maybe in a certain sense, I’m the one who’s really guilty” (287). In other situations, one character accuses another of blindness. When confronting Mrs. Dalton in court, Bigger’s lawyer, Boris Max, condemns her philanthropy for being “as tragically blind as your sightless eyes!” (393), and Bigger similarly faults his family for their lack of vision: “He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, . . . making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded” (106).

Just as Wright’s diction continues the literary custom of equating blindness with some form of ignorance, his characterization of Mrs. Dalton is equally traditional. A little over a decade before Native Son appeared, Jessica L. Langworthy surveyed 442 works of fiction containing blind characters and found that “Sometimes the blind characters are studied with a degree of care and show some information about the ways of blind people, but usually they embody the feelings of the author,—as of the general public,—of pity, awe, or idealization” (271). Wright’s characterization is similar to these, for he seems to have given little thought to the actual experience of not being able to see. He describes Mrs. Dalton always in an unnatural pose, with her face constantly “tilted upward” (151, 152, 276, 312), apparently due to her “attitude of intense listening” (60), and her fingers either “groping” her surroundings or just lifted “sensitively upward” (46, 128, 188, 201, 335). In addition, although she has been blind for ten years and Bigger realizes “She must know this house like a book” (128), she cannot walk through her home without “touching the walls to either side of her” (46). As Langworthy points out, such behavior is unrealistic; while some blind people “seem to have little sense of direction,

Langworthy’s article is also notable in that she demonstrates an awareness that “disability” is at least partly a social construction. Langworthy contends that “the greatest difficulties of the blind arise from the fact that the world as constituted was made ‘by the seeing for the seeing’” (280).
. . . Cannot all of us go about familiar places in the dark? Surely a person permanently in the dark can do the same” (273).

Wright’s focus, however, is not on Mrs. Dalton’s literal experience but on Bigger’s fear of her. In their initial encounters, Bigger expresses discomfort in her ability to detect his presence even though she cannot see him. To him, “her face seemed to be capable of hearing in every pore of the skin,” and his “skin tingled” as he realized that “Mrs. Dalton listened to the sound of his feet as he had walked. She knows exactly where I’m standing” (60). Although discomfort is a common reaction by an able-bodied person to one with a disability, the emphasis on hearing seems designed by Wright to set up Bigger’s response in the murder scene. When Mrs. Dalton enters the room, his concern for her hearing ability causes him to smother Mary in an attempt to silence her.

Unlike Bigger, the housekeeper Peggy does not seem discomfited by Mrs. Dalton’s presence but, rather, demonstrates a typical attitude of pity. She considers Mrs. Dalton “a poor thing” because “She’s blind” (56), but her stance is notably ironic given her further explanation of Mrs. Dalton as the source of the family’s wealth and philanthropy: “If it wasn’t for her, he [her husband] would not be doing what he does. . . . [M]ost of the money’s hers” (56). Despite Peggy’s status as an Irish immigrant dependent on the Dalton family for support, she still finds blindness such an adverse condition that she feels sorry for a woman who is clearly one of the most privileged members of American society. Bigger, however, seems to recognize the irony for he can only try “to get into his voice some of the pity for Mrs. Dalton that he thought Peggy expected him to feel” (56). Wright’s depiction of Mrs. Dalton thus demonstrates an ableist

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76 According to Jaeger and Bowman, people without disabilities “often feel uncertain how to act when encountering someone with a disability” and may develop both “aesthetic anxiety arising from another’s physical appearance and existential anxiety arising from the fear of loss triggered by encountering someone who experiences some sort of loss” (21). See also Langworthy, page 270.
perspective on disability, demonstrating little awareness of how a person might experience blindness but acknowledging how others often react when encountering someone who lacks vision.

Wright also recognizes the power of disability to provoke excess emotion,\textsuperscript{77} and he exploits this quality in the courtroom scene. When Mrs. Dalton is called to identify an earring found alongside Mary’s remains, she must do so by feeling the “metal object” placed in her hand (314). As she begins to recognize the earring, she starts to cry and the courtroom responds with appropriate sympathy: a woman “sobs” and a “wave of murmurs rose through the room” (314). Although the spectacle of any mother identifying the object that establishes her daughter as a murder victim should be sufficient cause for sympathy, Wright calls particular attention to her blindness. He describes her “fumbling” to examine the earring and has the attorney correct himself when he refers to her as “seeing,” rather than “meeting,” her daughter (314, 315). Mrs. Dalton appears especially pathetic, then, in being doubly “afflicted” by both blindness and grief.

In addition to the condition of total blindness, Wright also makes use of the racial connotations associated with color blindness. The Dalton family gives millions of dollars to support the education of African Americans, but they also own properties in black neighborhoods, including Bigger’s home, where they charge higher prices for rent than they do in white areas. As Butler points out, Daltonism is a form of color blindness, and thus the family name is ironic: “Although they see themselves as good liberal people who are ‘color-blind’ in the positive sense of being without racial prejudice, the novels establishes them as ‘color-blind’ in the negative sense, for it reveals that they are tragically blind to the way a white system oppresses blacks and how they as slumlords are part of the problem” (90-91). In addition,\footnotetext{\textsuperscript{77} For a discussion of the use of disability in relation to melodrama’s reliance on excessive emotions, see Martha Stoddard Holmes’s \textit{Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture} (2004).}
Daltonism refers specifically to an inability to distinguish red from green, and thus the name Dalton draws attention to the distinction between the “red” Bigger, who finds himself somewhat aligned with Communists, and the family’s previous black chauffeur, simply named Green.\footnote{For a similar interpretation, see Mikko Tuhkanen’s article, page 617, footnote 3.}

Whereas Green benefited from the education Mrs. Dalton provided him by obtaining a job with the government (55), Bigger resists the sense that she “wanted him to do the things she felt that \textit{he} should have wanted to do” (61-62, italics original). The notion of color-blindness, then, not only indicates the Daltons’ lack of awareness concerning their own hypocrisy, it also points to their failure to distinguish blacks as individuals, which in turn makes them susceptible to Bigger’s violence.

The concept of color blindness supplements the novel’s general association of blindness with ignorance, and that usage combined with the novel’s idiomatic language and stereotypical characterization place the work firmly within traditional conceptions of disability in Western culture. The addition of African American folklore, however, leads Wright to expand the nature of his metaphor.

**The Ghost, the Trickster, and the Badman**

Most often, Bigger perceives Mrs. Dalton as a “white blur” (85, 89, 110, 179, 236, 371)\footnote{In the essay “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright records feeling a similar presence when he began the novel, a “mental censor—product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America—standing over me, draped in white, warning me not to write” (448).} or “ghostlike” presence (46, 201, 202) that “filled his eyes and gripped his body” (85).\footnote{Mrs. Dalton’s “stony” eyes (201) also enhance her death-like appearance, although the adjective is also commonly associated with blindness (“Stony”).} This sense of her as a terrifying ghost recalls the folklore of African American slaves, which included instances of white masters returning after death to torment them. Elliott J. Gorn describes several
stories in which such ghosts would slap or whip the slaves, and he points out that, “For a people denied their own judicial institutions, such narratives offered an important means of regulating group conduct, curbing antisocial acts and teaching that supernatural retribution awaited those who violated norms of acceptable behavior” (559). Bigger’s perception of Mrs. Dalton recalls this folkloric tradition, for the mere thought of this “white blur floating toward him” fills him with fear (371). To Bigger, this indeterminate shape suggests the punishment whites have inflicted on blacks throughout history for transgressing the boundaries prescribed to them.

Bigger’s sense of Mrs. Dalton as a “white blur” appears most prominently when she suddenly enters the bedroom as he is about to rape her daughter. Bigger’s first job as a chauffeur for the family has been to drive Mary to school, but the young woman uses the occasion instead to get “to see how your people live” (69, italics original). The idiomatic use of the word see signifies Mary’s naiveté in that she perceives herself as being kind to Bigger but fails to understand the danger their contact poses for him; as he later explains to Max, “She wasn’t kind to me! . . . All I knew was that they kill us for women like her” (350). “They,” of course, refers to the whites throughout history who have lynched black men for having sexual relations with white women. Nevertheless, Bigger ends up reenacting the behavior many whites expected of black men. When Mary becomes too intoxicated to walk, Bigger must carry her to her bedroom, and their physical closeness leads to his molesting the now semi-conscious young woman. The rape is interrupted, however, when Mrs. Dalton appears at the door, and Bigger feels “a hysterical terror” (85). Because of her earlier ability to detect his presence through sound, Bigger realizes that she will hear her daughter’s mumbling, and, in an attempt to silence Mary, Bigger holds a pillow over her face and accidentally smothers her. He also backs away from Mrs. Dalton
to avoid her touch, and, left only with the sense of smell, Mrs. Dalton leaves the room believing Mary is merely intoxicated.

Because of the threat Mrs. Dalton poses to Bigger, his success in avoiding detection constitutes a usurpation of her power; Bigger gains a new sense of self-confidence, and Mrs. Dalton is left in the pathetic position of having unwittingly witnessed her own daughter’s murder. This exchange of power becomes evident when we consider the encounter as effectively constituting a game of Blind Man’s Buff (Wallace 38). In this game, a group of sighted persons tries to evade the touch of one who has been blindfolded. If someone is touched, that person becomes “it,” the one who is then made “blind.” As in *Native Son*, similar scenarios occur in several fictional works with blind characters, although most, while containing a certain level of cruelty, are usually nonviolent. As in the scene with Bigger, however, they constitute an exchange of power. David Bolt characterizes such moments as an encounter between an “Unseen Starer” and “Unseeing Victim” (735). Describing several scenes in which a person or group silently watches a blind person struggle to find his or her way, Bolt notes that the Unseen Starer may watch, laugh at, or even feel disgusted by the Unseeing Victim’s confusion, but in each case the “the power of the Unseen Stare is utilized to violate, belittle, inanimate, castrate and objectify the Unseeing Victim, a process that thereby elevates the status of the Unseen Starer” (745).

Similarly, in *Native Son* Bigger’s ability to evade Mrs. Dalton’s detection both belittles her and elevates him, and it is this exchange that leads him to perceive blindness as a vulnerability to be exploited.

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81 In comparing the bedroom scene to the game, Maurice O. Wallace contends that Bigger’s attempt to evade Mrs. Dalton results from his fear of “acquiring her blindness,” of “seeing” himself through her eyes in the Du Boisian sense of double consciousness (38). Instead of self-awareness, however, the passage indicates instead that Bigger is simply terrified of being caught and punished.
The newfound confidence that Bigger feels then propels him to more daring deeds. In front of the trusting Daltons, their investigator, and the reporters who gather at the scene, Bigger adopts the behavior of a timid and subservient black, thereby fooling everyone into thinking he is innocent. He then casts suspicion for the murder on Jan, develops a plan to collect ransom from the Daltons, and rapes and murders his girlfriend. Bigger’s courage stems from his decision that “a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind,” and, therefore, “All one had to do was be bold, do something nobody thought of” (106-07). Adopting an abelist point of view, Bigger assumes that “if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it” (107). This sense of being able to outwit those who hold power over him and the manner in which he goes about it both position him as another figure from African American folklore: the trickster.

Houston A. Baker identifies two types of tricksters in these narratives, animals like Brer Rabbit, who use cunning and disguise to outwit stronger opponents (21-24), and slaves like John and Buck, who exploit the vulnerabilities of a “tolerant and kind” master (24-26). In relation to Native Son, Baker suggests that “The moment he adopts a mask of innocence, subservience, and stupidity to allay the suspicions of detective Britten and the newspaper reporters, Bigger plays the role of trickster” (137). But several of Bigger’s actions demonstrate this role. After killing Mary, Bigger decides to hide her body in order to trick her parents into thinking she has already left on a planned trip out of town. As Wright describes in gruesome detail, Bigger ultimately shoves the young woman’s body into the furnace, decapitating her in the process. And his plan works. The Daltons begin a frantic search for Mary’s whereabouts and, although the investigator, Britten, initially suspects Bigger, Mr. Dalton’s liberal attitude and Bigger’s timid pose convince everyone that he is innocent. Feeling confident that “they would never think that he had done it;
not a meek black boy like him” (190), Bigger further plays on Britten’s distrust of Communists and hints that Jan may be guilty. Jan is then arrested, and Bigger develops the plan to collect a ransom by sending a letter that indicates Mary has been kidnapped. It is only when the reporters discover Mary’s bones in the furnace and Bigger suddenly runs away that he becomes a suspect. Even then, when Bigger kills Bessie, he thinks he can outwit the police by throwing her body down an air-shaft.

Bigger’s scheming and mask of subservience thus recall the cunning and disguise of the animal trickster, while his exploitation of the Daltons’ liberalism further reflects the behavior of the slave tricksters. Furthermore, just as the tricksters before him sometimes fail their quests, Bigger ultimately fails his. He is quickly arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. If Bigger’s role as a trickster is to exploit blindness, however, his role as badman is simply to rebel against it.

Most critics identify Bigger as a “badman” or “bad nigger” character, which Jerry H. Bryant defines as “a violent man: a killer, a creator of mayhem, a sower of disorder” (1). This figure developed in the African American ballad tradition, which portrays him as a man who “pumped ‘rockets’ into a gambling adversary who annoyed him, or ‘blew away’ the woman who cheated on him, or gunned down a white sheriff” (Bryant 10). Set in opposition to the subservient Uncle Tom, these badmen became folk heroes to many African Americans for their willingness to flout the system whites had imposed on them. John W. Roberts adds that the ballads depict the badman as “cruel, exploitive, daring, and oblivious to both the American social and legal systems,” and thus he becomes a hero “not in spite of the terror and cruelty associated

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82 Bryant traces the changes in this character from ballads to toasts to literature, but Wright’s Bigger seems a composite figure of the various forms.
with him but because of it” (327). Most of these characters are also punished (with jail or execution), just as Bigger is.

Bigger’s cruelty and violence establish him as a badman type, but Wright develops this figure by showing his character’s badness “to be the result of the conditions produced by white racism” (Bryant 65). In the essay “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright describes some of the real-life badmen he had known, black males who tormented the other boys, cheated whites, or threatened violence. Wright states that these “Bigger Thomases” were “the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell” (437). Their rebellion was thus a product of segregation, a “war” between neighbors in which whites limited the education blacks could receive, kept them out of the police force, segregated them in residential and public spaces, restricted their employment, and in general built up “a vast, dense ideology of racial superiority that would justify any act of violence taken against [them] to defend white dominance” (438). In the urban environment of Chicago, Wright found such men to be more violent than those in the South. “It was not that Chicago segregated Negroes more than the South,” Wright explains, “but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago’s physical aspect . . . did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievements that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South” (442). Although Wright realized that this sense of exclusion “transcended national and racial boundaries” (443), the character he creates is a native son, a distinct product of the country he lives in.

Bigger’s lawyer, Max, defines this particular American environment in his speech to the court. Arguing that the success of the country was made possible only by colonists who “shut
their eyes to the humanity of other men,” Max poses a nation predicated on the power of blindness:

Our forefathers came to these shores and faced a harsh and wild country. . . . They were colonists and they were faced with a difficult choice: they had either to subdue this wild land or be subdued by it. . . . But in conquering they used others, used their lives. . . . Exalted by the will to rule, they could not have built nations on so vast a scale had they not shut their eyes to the humanity of other men, men whose lives were necessary for their building. (389)

If the colonists had not chosen to blind themselves, Max contends, they would have had to recognize the humanity of those they enslaved, and the country could not have been built. Max does not, therefore, cast blame on the country’s founders but on those who continue to remain “blind,” such as the Daltons. Through this argument, the symbolism of Mrs. Dalton’s blindness becomes clear; in her ghostlike appearance, she functions as a revenant of the blind colonists, and in her literal form as the continuation of that oppression. Through his description of Bigger, Max also effectively delineates how this system creates the badman: “Hemmed in, limited, circumscribed, he sees and feels no way of acting except to hate and kill that which he thinks is crushing him” (390).

In Max’s speech, Wright is also updating the metaphor of blindness. While it still refers to a form of ignorance, blindness here denotes a willful disregard for others that enables, rather than disables, its bearer. Bigger gives a similar definition when he considers the “blindness” of his own family alongside that of whites: “He felt that they wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; . . . and they were blind to what did not fit. They did not want to see what others were doing if that doing did not feed their own desires” (106). His mother’s religion, Bessie’s
whiskey, the Daltons’ liberalism—Bigger views all of these as a means of ignoring the harsh realities of life. In both cases, such willful disregard is empowering, but it also makes people vulnerable; Max warns of another Civil War, and his family, Bessie, and the Daltons are all harmed by Bigger’s violence.

In addition to depicting the badman as a product of his environment, Wright also makes Bigger more psychologically complex than his predecessors, and he continues to relate Bigger’s actions to the condition of blindness. Initially, Bigger acts out of fear. In an early scene, Bigger beats and humiliates his friend Gus to avoid facing his own fear of robbing a white man. In realizing his motives, Bigger considers that his “courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness” (42). Like his white oppressors and own family, then, Bigger himself is choosing to be “blind,” in this case willfully ignoring the reality of his feelings as a means of survival. Bigger again acts out of fear when he kills Mary to avoid her mother’s detection and when he kills Bessie to prevent her from informing on him. In both of these situations, Bigger senses the presence of a “white blur” hovering nearby (85, 236), and it is his terror of this figure, of the centuries-old power that Mrs. Dalton’s blindness represents, that leads him to commit murder.

The fear Bigger feels before killing Bessie, however, is only a momentary interruption to the confidence he has gained from killing Mary. This confidence is also an integral trait of the badman of ballads. For these men, Bryant explains, “‘Ba-adness’ is the sine qua non of his self-respect, the essence of his identity, and it is largely measured by the assurance with which he says he is bad” (11). The morning after the murder, Bigger’s memory of what he had done, “the

83 Bryant points out that “The pithily laconic ballad form allowed no psychological or social analysis, and the artists sought no mitigation or explanation of the badman’s behavior,” whereas Wright “endows Bigger with a self-consciousness that enables him to see how his violence can bring him metaphysical and psychological freedom” (64).
awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared” (105). Walking the streets, Bigger “wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl . . . . Yes; if he did that a look of startled horror would come over their faces” (129). Doing what “they thought he never could” thus ends Bigger’s fear: “The feeling of being always enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force had gone from him” (150). With newfound confidence, Bigger enacts his trickster deeds—disguising himself as a timid black, sending a ransom note, and setting up Jan as a suspect—and he threatens Jan with a gun when he encounters him. But Bigger’s change of spirits ends quickly when Mary’s remains are discovered. Bigger runs away, and the fear that he had always known returns.

Like the badmen of folklore and those Wright knew who “were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken” (“How” 437), Bigger also pays the price for his actions. He is arrested and imprisoned, and it is there that he begins to realize his own “blindness.” When Jan tells Bigger that he understands why he threatened him, that “my white face was making you feel guilty, condemning you” (287), Jan’s recognition of his humanity leads Bigger to a reciprocal understanding: “For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him. . . . He saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes” (287). Max’s defense of Bigger, even though Bigger does not really understand it, also makes him feel that someone else recognizes his humanity. Facing execution, however, Bigger wavers between fear and a dawning sense of his own worth. He wants to believe that “that white looming mountain of hate [was] not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan,” but “then he was faced with a high hope the like of
which he had never thought could be, and a despair the full depths of which he knew he could not stand to feel” (361).

Bigger’s ultimate acceptance of his badman essence appears at the end of the novel. In his final meeting with Max, Bigger tries to explain the reason for his actions: “I hurt folks ‘cause I felt I had to; that’s all. . . . But I ain’t hard, . . . they didn’t see me and I didn’t see them” (425). Acknowledging the mutual state of “blindness,” Max also assumes that Bigger only perceives himself as “bad” because everyone has always told him he is (427). Yet Bigger asserts his badness as a positive force: “I didn’t want to kill! . . . But what I killed for, I am! . . . What I killed for must’ve been good!” (429). Since “badness” is “good” in the sense of a badman folk hero, Wright thus establishes Bigger’s violence as, in part, a positive means of rebellion. At the same time, Bigger’s assertion fails to acknowledge the humanity of those he killed, and so the circle of willful ignorance is completed: “blind” oppressors have created “blind” badmen, both empowered by their condition yet vulnerable to its destructive power. Max ends the novel refusing to accept this badman premise and thus adopting his own “blindness”; he “groped” for his hat “like a blind man” and refuses to look back at Bigger as he walks away (429). Bigger, however, smiles “a faint, wry, bitter smile” as he hears the cell door close (430).

Wright’s metaphor of blindness stands apart from the more common trope of invisibility, which appears most prominently in Ralph Ellison’s post-World War II novel Invisible Man (1952). As Todd M. Lieber describes,

“[I]nvisibility” suggests the situation of a group stripped of its native culture and forced to adhere to alien standards and values while its own cultural qualities were ignored; socially it reflects the conditions of a group whose basic plight was

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84 Referencing Bigger’s final expression, Baker notes that “Black folklore includes countless examples of strong black men giving ‘a faint, wry, bitter smile,’ or the final destructive thrust to the revered symbols of white America, and Bigger Thomas’s act is simply a continuation of this heritage” (134).
long overlooked or pushed into obscure shadows; [and] perhaps most significantly it embodies the complex psychological dilemmas of men without a sense of vital group identity, whose sense of individual human identity is often denied by the dominant society. (86)

Tracing the metaphor through the works of several African-American writers, Lieber finds two “modes of approach”: an “innate or inherent invisibility,” which “is involuntary, a result of the fact that the black man in America has lived in the midst of a society which has refused to recognize his humanity,” and a second in the concept of “mask-wearing,” which “is not necessarily inherent in one’s relationship to society, but rather is produced by the conscious adoption of a false identity which hides and may eventually usurp the ‘true’ identity beneath” (87). As an example of the first approach, Lieber accurately describes *Native Son* as a story “about a man’s struggle to achieve self-realization, to move from . . . nothingness and selflessness . . . toward a positive sense of identity” (89). However, when he speaks of “the motifs of blindness and invisibility” that Wright employs (89), Lieber fails to point out how the two conditions differ. Instead of describing a state of being that applies solely to the subjugated Other, Wright’s use of blindness references the converse side of the relationship. Ellison later makes this point clear in his narrator’s opening lines: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (3). Invisibility thus results from the willful “blindness” of others, and it is that force that Wright chooses to highlight.

**Conclusion**

Several critics have discussed Wright’s use of blindness in the novel, recognizing its reference to both white oppression and its victims. To James Nagel, blindness “is operative
throughout the novel as a metaphor of a lack of understanding and of a tendency to generalize individuals on the basis of race” (110), while Robert Butler perceives the characters in general as “blinded by environmental conditioning and emotional intensity” (43). Edward Margolies notes the reciprocal nature of the condition, addressing the ways in which Bigger “has blinded himself to the realities of Negro life as well as to the humanity of whites” and “how blind whites are to his humanity” (41-42). Similarly, Todd Lieber suggests that “Unseen by the world, Bigger is in turn unable to see clearly, unable to comprehend the forces which, paradoxically, both deny him and insist on defining him” (89). While these critics accurately describe the basic metaphor, the issues raised in the field of Disability Studies enable us to interrogate such metaphors more fully, as I have tried to do, as well as to consider the ways such reciprocal understandings between author and reader create stereotypical assumptions about real people with disabilities.

Indeed, Native Son reveals little about the condition of blindness or the various ways individuals might experience it. What it does imply is that literal blindness can be a source of discomfort and pity to sighted people, that blind people are ignorant in some form, and that such ignorance can be alternately empowering and harmful to both themselves and others.

Analyzing one novel, of course, does not provide an overall assessment of disability’s role in African American modernism, and thus more work needs to be done in this area. The novel does, however, continue the modernist portrayal of disability as a “defect,” even if an empowering one, and as a trait shared by most members of that generation. Wright’s assignment of disability to the dominant culture is particularly notable coming from a member of a subordinated population. If considered alongside the degenerationists I discussed in chapter 1,

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85 For other discussions of blindness in the novel, see Precoda and Polanah, and Rosenblatt.

86 For an alternative depiction of disability as empowering in several post-World War II works by African American women writers, see Garland-Thomson’s “Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lord: Revising Black Female Subjectivity.”
those who defined their superiority by perceiving disability as a sign of inferiority, we can conceive of *Native Son* as having evened the score. Indeed, the public’s branding of Bigger as an “ape” (270) provokes this comparison.

Wright’s inclusion of African American folklore also updates that tradition. The ghost, trickster, and badman characters have always been used to represent sides in the battle between white oppression and black resistance. By making them figuratively blind, Wright shows the nature of the struggle to be based on the dominant culture’s refusal to acknowledge the humanity of the subordinated one, and the latter’s violent resistance to be a reciprocal effect. Drawing on Western tradition more generally, Wright depicts America’s white and black populations as opposing players in a deadly game of Blind Man’s Buff.
Conclusion:

Disability and the Modernist Era

The chapters that bookend this study, on *The Secret Agent* and *Native Son*, demonstrate a continued interest among authors throughout the time period in exploiting the metaphorical potentials of disability. Although most of the writers I have discussed were also concerned with the materiality of illness or impairment, they still perceived such bodily variations as repositories of meaning. Specifically, they pose disabilities as indicators of a generation made “defective” by social upheaval and the First World War. In addition to the pejorative nature of this overall perception, the problem with such metaphors is that, left unanalyzed, they persist in “sedimenting stigmatizing beliefs about people with disabilities” (Mitchell 24). They suggest, for example, that persons with intellectual disabilities are irrational (*The Secret Agent*) or that blind people are ignorant (*Native Son*). One of the efforts of Disability Studies has been to recognize these metaphors for what they are and thus reject the associations they make between fictional portrayals and the real lives of people with similar health conditions.

Analyzing the fictional portrayals of disabilities in this period can also enhance our understanding of the general attitudes toward “abnormal” bodies, and variations in those attitudes, that existed at the time. The modernists’ use of disability to characterize their generation as “defective” seems to reflect, as well as to challenge, contemporary prejudices. These attitudes appeared most prominently, and with the most devastating results, in the continued popularity of degeneration theory. The fear that health conditions such as mental illness, retardation, alcoholism, and even some physical impairments might be passed down to
succeeding generations led to a series of sterilization, immigration, and marriage laws in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, and directly provoked the Nazis’ mass murder of disabled persons during World War II. General prejudices were also evident in the “Ugly Laws” passed in the United States, which were aimed at shielding the public from those who “‘exposed’ disease, maiming, deformity, or mutilation for the purpose of begging” (Schweik 2). Modernist authors, however, both “expose” such conditions and keep their characters integrated within their societies. Instead of isolating such individuals, they explore the difficulties that they perceived in being disabled, such as the loss of functional abilities, or the effects of prejudice and improper health care. They do not stereotypically cast their disabled characters as beggars, but they may make them dependent on caretakers and then depict the stress that such caretakers may experience. They may also make disabled characters criminals, or simply portray them as average citizens who work, pursue romance, or form friendships and families.

Even in terms of narrative function, the tradition of isolating or eliminating the disability in order to restore social order largely disappears in this era’s fiction. Conrad may kill off Stevie, but degeneracy remains a destructive force in the Professor’s continued presence. Woolf also eliminates Septimus from the text but leaves Clarissa absorbing the message she perceives in his suicide. Fitzgerald somewhat cures Nicole but lets Dick remain plagued by alcoholism. Hemingway’s characters neither improve nor disappear; they merely end the novel as they began, trying to cope with health conditions they find prohibiting. And Wright leaves Bigger Thomas set to be executed at the end of *Native Son*, but Max’s groping “like a blind man” (429) indicates that “blindness” continues to spread throughout the country’s population. Only Joyce suggests a positive outcome, with Gerty’s confident, limping walk demonstrating a new-found sense of empowerment. Most often, whatever particular social disorder has left its mark on these
characters remains unresolved at the novels’ close. Such endings seem appropriate to the times, however, as the instabilities these authors perceived in their era would continue at least through the Second World War.

This study thus aims to shed light on the experience of and attitudes toward various types of disabilities during the first half of the twentieth century, while also enhancing our understanding of the period’s literature. Scholars have previously considered such issues as degeneration and eugenics in the works of some of these writers,\(^87\) the discourse surrounding invalid women,\(^88\) and the portrayals of disabilities in film.\(^89\) Considerable critical attention has also been paid to specific works, as I discuss in each chapter. This study is the first, however, to call attention to the widespread use of disability as a generational trait and to examine more comprehensively the ways these authors portrayed and employed disabilities in their narratives.

I have made some generalizations—that modernists as a group treat disabilities as defects, that they continue the tradition of using disability as a metaphor for social ills even as they put their own twists on the standard tropes, and that some recognize the social issues that contribute to turning a bodily condition into a disability. I have also tried to point out the specificities of certain representations. For example, in chapter 2 I address the similarities between Woolf’s and Fitzgerald’s portrayals of mental illness through multiple points of view, while noting that the authors differ in their perception of illness as a matter of intent. In chapter 3 I note the multiplicity of attitudes regarding disability’s effects on personal relationships, as illustrated in the contradictory outcomes of Jake Barnes’s and Gerty MacDowell’s pursuits of romance. The chapters that frame this study, on *The Secret Agent* and *Native Son*, are also

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\(^87\) See Greenslade, Childs, and Pickens.

\(^88\) See Price Herndl.

\(^89\) See Norden and Longmore “Screening.”
similar in their reliance on metaphor while differing in tone, with Conrad mocking idiocy from his narrator’s privileged perspective of “normalcy” and Wright embracing figurative blindness through his narrator’s sympathetic explanation of Bigger’s rebellion. Building on the existent scholarship, I have also called attention to previously unrecognized aspects of these authors’ works. For example, while critics have addressed the prevalence of degenerate traits in The Secret Agent’s cast, I also point to the ways in which Conrad updates the tradition of idiocy as a literary trope and to the differences between a character’s own perceptions of a disability and the judgments of others. Critics have similarly discussed Mrs. Dalloway in terms of how Septimus’s “insanity” becomes hard to differentiate from the others’ “sanity,” but I add to the discourse on Woolf’s concern with the individual consciousness to highlight the ways in which the these perspectives combine to form a more comprehensive portrait of mental illness than traditionally third-person narration had allowed. For Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night, much has been made of how Nicole’s schizophrenia affects her husband’s potential, but I address both the sensationalized nature of Fitzgerald’s portrayal and how his use of multiple points of view makes Nicole more sympathetic and Dick less so than most critics perceive. My readings on The Sun Also Rises and the “Nausicaa” chapter of Ulysses differ substantially from the standard interpretations. Whereas most critics perceive Jake as feeling emasculated and Gerty as pitifully “doomed” to spinsterhood, I argue that Jake perceives his injury as a physical, rather than psychological, disability, and that Gerty achieves the sexual attention she desires. Concluding with Native Son, I add to the scholarship on both blindness as metaphor and Bigger as badman to consider how Wright updates the literary tradition by presenting blindness in its figurative form as empowering and by combining this trope with African-American folklore.
Much work remains to be done in this area. I have focused on only six canonical novels, and more texts in and beyond the Anglo-American mainstream need to be analyzed. I have also addressed the effects of public attitudes toward disability, the use of metaphor, the effects of stylistic experimentation, the major theme of impaired relationships, and certain aspects of African-American modernism, but other conventions of what we define as modernist literature need consideration as well. I offer this project as only a beginning to such research. As I indicated in my introduction, however, Hemingway’s prostitute seems to speak for her generation in declaring that “Everybody’s sick” (23). Ill, injured, or disfigured, most modernist characters appear “afflicted” in body or mind by the crises of their times. Examining these portrayals thus enhances our understanding of both the era’s attitudes toward disability and its literature.
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