

Progress or Regression: Depictions of Disability and Disease in Literature

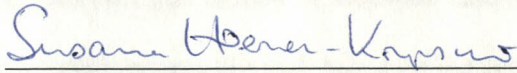
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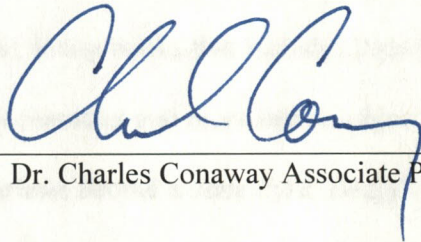
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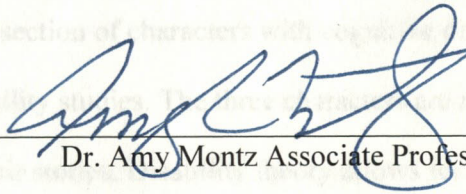
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Abstract

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Portrayals of disability and disease in literature date back to the beginning of recorded history, and these portrayals constantly shift based on the culture that writes them. However, depictions of cognitive disabilities lag behind physical disabilities due to communication being difficult or impossible. Many books that include characters with cognitive disabilities resort to using them less like a character and more like an object that serves the narrative. The characters Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Benjy Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Christopher "Stump" Hall in Wiley Cash's *A Land More Kind than Home* offer a cross section of characters with cognitive disabilities that span eras of great importance to disability studies. The three characters are nonverbal; yet, they perform different functions within their stories. Disability theory allows for readers to better understand these characters and how their disability or disease reflects on the writer and culture that produced them. With a proper understanding of the culture that produced characters, one can see how he or she relates to modern thought on disability studies. Theorists' goal is to have more well-rounded characters who happen to have a disability, and to push for more writers with disabilities to share their stories. Alas, such a task is impossible for many cases of cognitive disability. It is difficult to portray a character that cannot communicate their thoughts or feelings in a way readers can understand. Most portrayals of characters like these leave aspects of their characters lacking, but when a writer attempts to write such a voice the depiction of the character helps to normalize the disability as a part of human existence. For a character with a cognitive disability to be well-rounded, the character needs to participate in the narrative beyond being an object.

Keywords: disability, disease, disability theory, cognitive disability,

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The Changing Portrayals of Nonverbal Characters in the Novel

In literature, characters portrayed with a disability or an illness that mimics a disability are marked as *other* and often serve as a plot device that supports either the central characters of a text or the plot of the story rather than a representation of a realistic character with a disability. These marked characters exist outside the realm of the norm in their stories, and novels show them as non-human beings. Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror*, said about the *other* in society, “It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire” (10). Kristeva points out that individuals with disabilities exist, but only on the edges of society; however, their existence inspires fascination in others, which results in their frequent portrayals in various popular media. Disability and disease mark characters in the novels as different from the norm of a story, and both disability and disease in literature are traits of characters and not accurate representations of what it means to live with either. Furthermore, portrayals of disability and disease in literature vary a great deal depending on the goals of the author with a multitude of different disabilities and diseases serving similar purposes. However, the starkest contrasts in these portrayals are the divides between physical and cognitive disabilities as those with a cognitive disability cannot communicate on their disability.

The problem of using disability and disease as little more than identifiers that a character is different is that it reinforces old stereotypes about those afflicted with them. Instead of being characters with a disability, they are just the disability. As Tobin Siebers claims in his book *Disability Theory*, this problem arises out of a disconnect in the understanding of what it means to have a disability. According to Siebers, the disability identity splits into two camps for identification with one being that disability is a biological/medical construction and the “other” that it is a social construction (3). The theory of the biological/medical construction has existed

since the beginning of recorded history and is the reason behind drastic measures to dehumanize and move people with disabilities to the edges of society. Despite the historic precedence of this model of thinking, the notion of disability as a social construction gained traction with disability theory in the latter half of the twentieth century. Siebers states that “disability is not a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity” (4). This change in thought allows for readers to examine characters in literature along similar lines as other identity-based theories, and should turn into better representations of characters with disabilities. Before looking at modern characters with disabilities and disability theory, one should understand the beliefs that surround disability in society.

Often, especially in the past, disability and disease exist at the borders of society. Both are threatening to society because they present a part of humanity different from what society considers the norm, and are removed from the public eye becoming what Kristeva describes as *abject*. The *abject* occupies the borders of a society because the *abject* is a threat to what society considers normal (15-16), and for most of history, and even today, people with disabilities have been thought as *abject*. Although better known now, the cause and diagnosis of disability and disease varied over time and place. Disability and disease were once thought of as indicators from God that the marked person had invoked God’s wrath for a reason (Bérubé 570). But it was not just religion that caused the *abject* nature of disability. Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues, in her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, that disability’s movement to the border is a mix between fascination and rejection of what is different (56). These opinions of disability as an affront to society show how society’s treatment of such individuals was cruel. In their book *Understanding Disability*, Paul T. Jaeger and Cynthia Bowman discuss the rise of eugenics in reaction to the presence of those considered a detriment to society (34-36). While Jaeger and Bowman identify

many markers used to justify discrimination because of eugenics, people with disabilities faced harsher treatments than the law called for like forced sterilization (36). These harsh treatments were well publicized enough that writers included aspects of them in their stories. Since these aspects appeared in stories, these harsh treatments became normalized. It is a goal of disability studies to understand why these thoughts persist and how to change depictions of disability and disease to fit in with the idea that both are social constructions used to remove people from the center to the borders of society so they do not challenge popular belief.

Disability studies is a relatively young field compared to other theories of identity, but some theorists claim that despite its short period of existence, the depiction of disability in the media has changed. Bérubé suggests in his article "Disability and Narrative" that now more than ever there are more representations of disability in literature and elsewhere (568). An increased prevalence of such characters means that readers will be introduced to those marked by disability and will no longer continue the pattern where disability is *abject*. Rosalyn Benjamin Darling asserts in her book *Disability and Identity* that better representation in the media leads to family and friends better understanding those marked with disability or disease, which in turn erases the possibility of disability being moved to the borders (33). Although portrayals of disability are more common now, theorists claim that the portrayals do not show any other major changes besides appearing more often.¹ Essentially, disability is more visible in society through its use in many mediums, but just depicting disability is not enough to change society's understanding of it.

¹ Theorists like Tobin Siebers and Charles A Riley II assert that even with increased representation in media portrayals of people with disabilities still suffer from the same problems seen throughout history.

Before delving into modern thought on disability theory, one must understand the history of disability and disease and their depictions in literature. Portrayals of disability and disease appeared in the earliest stories, with the typical example being the blind prophet in many Greek and Roman works. However, such societies were aware of many different disabilities and drafted legislation on how to treat those with a disability (Jaeger and Bowman 26). Many treatments were harsh, with some cultures infantilizing those with disabilities, some condemning them to a life of poverty and no rights, and even some cultures choosing to execute those that did not fit into their culture (Jaeger and Bowman 26-27). Although ancient, these early influences permeated treatment of disability and disease well into modern day. A notable influence is that many cultures use religion as a reason for a person's affliction with disease or disability. The reasoning is that a person has incurred the wrath of God in some fashion that they are either punished or blessed with disability or disease, although most cultures frame it as punishment (Jaeger and Bowman 28). Therefore older cultures pushed their people who had a disability or disease to the edges of society so they could not challenge the status quo. Even though this thought persists in some manner today, by the nineteenth century, attitudes toward treatment of disability and disease began to change.

In the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century, disability and disease became more visible as afflictions in need of treatment. While the visibility for both cognitive and physical disability increased, physical disabilities saw greater improvement over their treatment. For example, Queen Victoria commissioned the creation of a hospital meant for soldiers to help those who received grievous bodily injuries ("Netley" 1234). The creation of Netley is an example of a culture taking greater strides in treating those who suffer from a disability. The wish to establish such a hospital also reflects the prevailing thoughts by medical

professionals during this period. Medical professionals had begun to show greater acknowledgement of disability and disease even if that acknowledgement resulted in cruel treatments. Many professionals like Thomas Laycock in *Mind and Brain* and Francis Galton in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* subscribed to the idea of physiognomy. Physiognomy is the idea that one can judge a person's character, race, or other traits based on a person's facial characteristics. Physiognomy, now debunked, was utilized by many to try and understand some people's predilection to certain behaviors (Galton 530). The language employed by nineteenth-century doctors and scientists does treat those with a disability or disease, especially cognitive ones, as less than human, but these same doctors started to separate the cause from a nebulous one like religion and tried to find ways to treat disability (Jaeger and Bowman 33). These changes made their way into the novel where there was a better understanding of disability and disease, but they still portrayed such afflictions as deserving of being pushed out of the public sight. The science of physiognomy would beget eugenics which is the idea that humanity can be improved by selectively controlling human breeding to avoid unfavorable traits in future generations. According to Jaeger and Bowman, Francis Galton is the father of eugenics which he based on the work of his cousin Charles Darwin (34). Sadly, Galton's poor understanding of his cousin's work and his unscientific assumptions of human heredity continued into the twentieth century.

It did not take long for eugenics to cross the Atlantic and become popular in America where many places began to enact laws based on it. Some states legalized forced sterilization of those deemed undesirable for passing on their genetic material and some scientists worked to legalize euthanizing or lobotomizing those with a disability (Jaeger and Bowman 36-38). It became popular to show those marked as *other* to be so different from their fellow humans that

they were a detriment to society's improvement. The laws created to actively harm those with a disability highlighted the status of those afflicted as non-human, and therefore unworthy of existing in society. In *Idiocy: A Cultural History*, Patrick McDonagh claims that the hope was to make their humanity meaningless (328-29). Nevertheless, portrayals of disability increased and popular opinion would turn to take a softer approach to treatment of disability and disease. Eugenics' popularity would wane in most of the world in the Thirties with the exception of Nazi Germany. With the dissipation of eugenics and a better understanding of disability and disease, those afflicted were not pushed to the edges of society as harshly as before. These changes would lead to more portrayals of disability in literature with fewer renditions being as problematic as their forebearers. After the start of other civil rights movements, many campaigned for more rights for the disabled at the beginning of the 1970s (Jaeger and Bowman 39). The protests in the seventies would lead to more gains in government protection for disability and subsequently helped lead to the formation of disability studies.

In the 1980s, scholars began treating disability as a minority identity to be studied in academia. Theorists like Siebers and Bérubé led the movement by looking at disability as a socially constructed identity as opposed to a medical identity. This change means that an analysis of disability in society focuses on how society constructs the disability and what that construction does to the person who has it. The goal of such work is to shine a light on the problems that people with disabilities face in hopes of enacting change that will help them. Charles A. Riley II asserts in his book, *Disability & the Media*, that the handling of disability as another medical issue affects society's view of disability as a whole and continues the cycle that it is not a societal issue (13). The goal of many disability theorists is to bring disability to the forefront of society as an identity that exists and should not be pushed to the fringes anymore.

Theorists like Siebers and Riley believe that this can change with more portrayals of disability in the media, getting more people with disability or disease to share their story.

Although the goals of the 1980s did not come to fruition, there have been greater steps to ensuring better media representation of those with a disability or disease. Darling points to the increased representation of people with disabilities as normalizing them to a point that they are no longer pushed to the edges of society. The representations have improved, but there are still problems with portrayals of disability. Bérubé focuses on two issues when it comes to portraying disability with the portrayals often being used to turn the character into either an object or an exceptional being. Bérubé references the increasing popularity of disability as a special trait that gives a person power, and he cites the *X-Men* comics as an example of this depiction (569). Bérubé calls this type of character as having an exceptionality which means that instead of being a traditionally flat character defined by the problems with their disability, the character is better because of their disability (569). An exceptional character exists to highlight the problems of showing disability as a dire issue, but it only serves to separate the character further because they are still not a well-rounded character that acts like a human who happens to have a disability or disease.

Even though Bérubé stated that disability is more visible today, he criticizes the use of it by either making such characters exceptional or reducing them to tools for a story (570). While Bérubé's criticism applies to both physical and cognitive disability, he specifically points to using characters with cognitive disabilities as problematic. In his example, he brings up Benjy from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and his use as the "moral barometer" of the story (Bérubé 575). In *Writing Disability*, Sara Newman backs up a similar claim by stating that many spaces still default to one normal body that makes others different (180). Both Bérubé and

Newman express a need for those with disabilities to write and challenge social construction, but there is a disconnect between the need of a voice for those with a nonverbal disability and the inability to challenge construction through communication. For example, the three primary characters discussed in this paper all suffer from a disability that renders them nonverbal to the other characters in the story. Except for Benjy Compson, readers never see the perspectives of the characters. Plus, all three characters exist more as narrative tools to help the story than they do as an actual human character.

For my thesis, I focus on Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Benjy Compson from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Christopher "Stump" Hall from Wiley Cash's *A Land More Kind than Home*. These three characters all have a disability or disease that renders them nonverbal to "other" characters in their novels, and only Benjy has readers see his thoughts or reactions to the story. The chosen characters cover a great deal of time and highlight differences in attitude and treatment of those marked as *abject* due to disability or disease. The three characters are at the whim of the construction of disability in their respective novels, and they each show how that construction has changed and if there has been any progress in challenging said construction.

The first character I cover is Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In the story, Bertha is an *abject* being that the protagonist views as a crooked mirror of her existence. Bertha has been the subject of a lot of scholarship² as a woman suffering from some form of hysteria and how that relates to Brontë. *Jane Eyre* also offers interesting insight on disability studies as there is more than one character with a disability in the novel. Rochester, the primary

² Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, Elizabeth J. Donaldson's "The Corpus of the Madwoman," Susannah B. Mintz's "Illness, Disability, and Recognition in *Jane Eyre*," etc.

love interest, has blindness in one eye and is missing part of an arm by the end of the novel. He offers a chance to explore how Brontë portrays the different disabilities. Of course, Bertha faces harsher treatments because her disability means that she is nonverbal. Since she is nonverbal, Bertha cannot participate in the story beyond what the other characters state.

Although Benjy's disability is similar to Bertha's in that they cannot communicate to other characters, Faulkner decided to open his novel with Benjy as the primary narrator for the reader. Benjy having an opportunity to represent his thoughts or reactions to the story is uncommon for stories that have characters with cognitive disabilities. Benjy's use in the story gives a voice to a character type that is silent in literature and gives him a chance to be more than a tool for the plot. Nevertheless, Benjy still falls into the category of being a literary device according to theorists like Bérubé who claim that he is used to show which members of the Compson family are just. Theorists also struggle with many of the stereotypes associated with cognitive disability that Faulkner employs. Despite the problems surrounding Benjy, his character is revolutionary when it comes to disability studies.

Sadly, the progress shown by Benjy does not extend to modern depictions of cognitive disability. The character Stump, from Wiley Cash's *A Land More Kind than Home*, has a similar disability to both Bertha and Benjy in that he cannot communicate with those around him. Unlike Benjy, Stump never speaks to the reader. Instead, other narrators describe his life and death without his input. One positive that Stump has over the other characters is that he is loved by his whole family even if some of that love is displayed with disastrous results. This change is one that Darling would call important for changing popular perceptions of disability. However, if the love of his family only exists to show what kind of people they are and how they came to commit the actions in the story, Stump only exists as a catalyst that begins the conflict in Cash's

novel. Like Bertha, Stump cannot interact with the reader to become a complete character, and like Benjy, he is just a device that Cash uses to create the other characters. Stump also shows that even though there have been advancements in the portrayal of disability and disease in literature with the way some people treat him, his portrayal still illustrates how a character with a disability is a sideshow for others to gawk at in the story.

This paper offers a background on disability theory and its place in the changing world of literature. Three characters exemplify the portrayal of cognitive disability in the novel. Bertha Mason, Benjy Compson, and Christopher "Stump" Hall all bring different perspectives and problems to their respective portrayals. Bertha is a foil to the protagonist and is a threat to her happiness, and she inspires her to change. Unfortunately, Bertha's treatment by others suggests that those with a cognitive disability should be hidden away, and she only exists to help Jane proceed through Jane's story. Benjy offers a refreshing change to the portrayal of cognitive disability, but he ultimately falters because, like the others, Faulkner uses him to showcase the personalities of the other characters. Finally, Stump shows a more modern understanding of the family's treatment, but it still relies on old stereotypes to work as a story. Plus, Stump is less character and more object for others to use in their own story. So, there is a change in the portrayal of disability and disease, but the changes are minimal and do not mirror the hopes of disability theorists. Although the characters mentioned are renowned and the focus of much scholarship, their existence toes the line between the biological/medical construction of disability and the social one. The characters do not challenge preconceived notions of disability, but they do offer a glimpse into how depictions changed and make one question how to challenge the social construction of disability and disease in literature.

The Abjection of the "Madwoman's" Disease

Jane Eyre follows the life of the titular character from her time as a neglected child to her eventual marriage to Mr. Rochester. In the story, Jane meets Rochester's first wife, Bertha Mason. Bertha appears to have suffered a major break with reality and has begun acting like a wild beast. In this condition, Bertha is treated as *other* and is such an affront to decency that her husband must hide her from society. This attitude is apparent when no character criticizes her incarceration by her husband. Bertha's depiction clashes with other depictions of nonverbal characters because no one tries to understand her, unlike the families of Benjy and Stump. The treatment of Bertha caused by her affliction is the opposite of the treatment of Rochester's physical disability. Bertha and Rochester mark the difficulty of discerning disability from disease, and the way cultures handle difference between cognitive and physical afflictions

Due to the extreme variability of disability and disease, different symptoms change the portrayals of characters who have them. A common division is that of the physical marker versus the cognitive one. Historically, both are treated as *abject*, but those that did not affect the mind were allowed more visibility because most cultures felt they were less of an affront to their culture (Jaeger and Bowman 26). Jaeger and Bowman note that most disabilities were made invisible in some way, but physical ones became accepted sooner and more easily than cognitive ones (27). In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the reader meets two characters with disabilities or diseases in Rochester with his blindness and missing hand, Bertha Mason whose apparent disability is of a cognitive nature. This thesis focuses more on the characters with cognitive disabilities, but Rochester's physical limitations do show a difference in attitude that society has between the two types of disability. Rochester's condition demonstrates the idea that those with physical disabilities have an easier time participating in society than those with cognitive ones.

During the 1800s, Victorian society began turning a corner on the treatment of individuals with physical disabilities. In the *The British Medical Journal*, an anonymous author recorded the history and cause for the creation of a hospital for veterans. The Netley hospital's drive to care for soldiers with afflictions like Rochester reflects the changing attitude towards physical disability. According to Jaeger and Bowman, the popular thought on disability was changing at a rapid pace that started in the 1700s and continues today, and by the time of Brontë's novel, there was a more concerted effort to establish facilities to treat disability and disease (33). However, the style of treatment was not equal across types of disability, and race and gender influenced the treatment received by patients as well. *Jane Eyre* exemplifies these differences between the treatments Bertha and Rochester received for their disabilities based on both their gender and disability type. Of course, it is impossible to claim that both Bertha and Rochester should get the same treatment, and their different treatments come from the notion that their afflictions are just a medical issue. However, if one accepts the notion that the identity surrounding people with a disability or disease is a social contract, then one can conclude that the text treats Rochester more like a person for the sole reason his affliction does not affect his cognitive ability.

Rochester's blindness and missing hand mark him as a character who belongs to the borders of society where he can no longer seek attention nor act as an affront to the constructed norm, but Brontë uses Rochester's disability as a way for Jane Eyre to reconcile with him and get married (552). It is simple to see that the ordeal that left Rochester without his sight made him a more even match for Jane, and the change in social standing that makes the marriage work hints at the idea that his disability is the main reason for this change. Many disability theorists look at disability not as a result of biology but as another social construct that harms minority groups

(Jaeger and Bowman 11). According to Jaeger and Bowman, views on disability are created by popular societal attitudes and have little to do with the medical/biological reality of the disability (12). This assumption rings true for Rochester as Jane accepts his previously denied proposal at the end of the novel. Jane only accepts the engagement because Rochester's transformation has lowered his social standing to make him more of an equal to her. One could also view Rochester's disability as having transformed him into a more humble character who needs Jane, but this transformation still relies on Rochester losing his sight and his hand. Rochester even feels that his disability marks him as wholly undesirable to anyone when he mentions his "infirmities" and "deficiencies" only to have an impassioned Jane rebuff his statement as she claims not to see them (Brontë 548). It is touching to see that the journeys of both characters resulted in them getting married on equal footing, but it is problematic that equality was gained through the disability of Rochester. If Rochester does not wear the marker of his disability for his earlier deception of Jane in the novel, then there is no guarantee that he changed at all. Rochester's portrayal is problematic due to the necessity of his disability to symbolize equality, but he is not treated as being unworthy of fitting into society. Although Rochester's portrayal is far from perfect, he is at least able to have a voice in the narrative compared to the silence of his first wife.

Where Rochester's portrayal had some semblance of progressiveness for the era, Bertha reinforces many negative stereotypes of people with cognitive disabilities. Moreover, her treatment is almost regressive for the time as well. As mentioned above, the time period for *Jane Eyre* saw an increase in awareness of disability as a disease and an increase in facilities to treat people with them. The facilities were barbaric themselves, but they serve as an example that society had moved to treat those who needed it. Furthermore, Bertha's imprisonment was not

done just for her health but to protect Rochester's image from letting people know of his wife's predicament. Sadly, for Bertha, her cognitive disability is treated without any semblance of dignity. Brontë portrays her as non-human and as devolved to follow her baser instincts (Brontë 381-82). Bertha's wildness fits the description given by Jaeger and Bowman that characters with disabilities usually fill a common role between pitiable and ineffectual, borderline superhero, or evil, and Bertha fits into the evil category (97). Jaeger and Bowman go on to say that such characterizations are common in literature with disabled characters and that these characterizations act as an erasure of disabilities being anything more than markers for showing how a character does not fit into society (97). Of course, exclusion from society was Rochester's goal in imprisoning Bertha in the attic.

Even with social changes in treatment during the writing of *Jane Eyre*, the expected care for people with cognitive disabilities was abysmal bordering on barbaric. Many institutions designed to help people with disabilities were tolerated solely on the outskirts of society to keep the "abject" away from others (Jaeger and Bowman 33-34). This exclusion is clear in *Jane Eyre* with Bertha's relegation to an attic whose existence is only known by a handful of people. It is clear that Rochester hides Bertha because he views her as non-human and compares her to Jane using animal terms. Rochester calls out Bertha's red eyes and her bulky form compared to the beauty he sees in Jane (Brontë 381). Jane also participates in the insulting descriptions by calling the woman a "lunatic" and ignores the plight of Bertha in favor of her misery over her cancelled wedding (Brontë 383-84). The moment Jane leaves the attic, it appears that she has no recollection of Bertha, and reinforces the idea that a person with a cognitive disability or disease is better kept out of sight and out of mind. The situation is made even more disturbing because the problem surrounding Bertha is that the anger focused on Rochester's was due to hiding his

previous marriage and not about jailing his wife. One possible sympathy afforded Rochester is that Bertha staying under his care would be safer than being sent to an institution. There may be some truth to the previous statement, but it still creates a problem where Bertha becomes invisible because her disability is undesirable, and the only reason her existence matters in the story is that she is evidence of Rochester's first marriage.

While Charlotte Brontë's portrayal of Bertha's disability is problematic, she shows a surprising amount of knowledge of the "science" surrounding the diagnosis of similar disorders. During the writing of *Jane Eyre*, many professionals subscribed to physiognomy which is the debunked study of physical characteristics and how they identify race and an individual's inclination towards crime or disease. The nineteenth century scientist Francis Galton claimed "that there was a hierarchy of races that needed to be treated carefully to avoid the possibility of mixing "good" races and "bad" races" (529-30). Galton also evinced some propensity for eugenics which would become a popular idea moving forward, especially when referring to disability (530). Brontë even uses this hierarchy to explain away the "madness" present in Bertha. In *Jane Eyre*, the reader knows little of Bertha's past besides some short interjections by Rochester and Bertha's brother, but Rochester's claim that Bertha came from a "mad" family with Creole blood shows Brontë's support for Galton's theory (Brontë 379). Rochester goes further and claims that the family is well known for their "mad" tendencies further supporting the notion that the race and familial ties doomed Bertha from the start. Bertha is not treatable because her blood is tainted by the disease of her family. If one were to humor Galton's absurd claims, Bertha's possible disability could be genetic in some way; yet, the idea still fails to get to the core of the problem of Bertha's portrayal as a character marked as "abject". Bertha and her cognitive impairment are relegated to sideshow status in the novel, and her lack of voice means

that Bertha only exists for Jane to construct her understanding of the character, but instead of doing so, Jane focuses on her inability to marry Rochester. Although the portrayal of Bertha's disability is problematic, she does introduce an element to disability studies due to the fact that she is a woman who is disabled.

Women with disabilities were treated differently than men at the time of the novel. One nineteenth-century professor, Thomas Laycock, outlined his thoughts in his essay "Mind and Brain." According to Laycock, women were imperfect men, and this was due to having excessive "nervous tissue" (526). Laycock created the groundwork as to why a person much like Bertha would act the way they do, and in so doing Bertha has many qualities that Laycock would describe as related to this excess of nervous tissue. Laycock further divides men and women by stating that women are just not capable of the same level of abstract thought as men and could not work on anything outside of the home (527). However, Laycock does claim that it is not the main reason behind why he sees women acting like Bertha, instead, it is the emotions of a woman that drive her to be in such a state as Bertha is in *Jane Eyre* (527). Laycock's focus on his idea of hysteria in women mirrors much of the plight of Bertha. Specifically, Bertha is shown to be incapable of acting in a way that society deemed acceptable and she needed removal from standing out due to her "mad" identity. Laycock goes into great detail on what he sees as the reasons for hysteria, but he does not offer treatment or even concrete causes beyond avoiding being nervous. The work done by Laycock shows an understanding of the disease or disability that affects a person like Bertha, and it falls in line with other professionals at the time as well as being a popular enough theory for Brontë to use in her novel. Unfortunately, it does little to help the reader understand such a character with a disability like Bertha's because it comes from Laycock's understanding surrounding both cognitive disability and disease.

In an attempt to better understand characters like Bertha, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the *Madwoman in the Attic* focus on the psychology of women characters and pay special attention to Bertha Mason. Gilbert and Gubar claim that female characters who show signs of having what Laycock called nerves were actually infantilized by patriarchal power structures that constrained them to act out in ways that were described as "hysterical" (53). If one applies this claim to Bertha, then it becomes clear that she acted out under her domineering husband who was only able to fix his ways after gaining a disability himself. In her "hysterical" state, Bertha has some semblance of control over her situation and inserts herself into the story even if it is just for a brief moment. Gilbert and Gubar explore a lot of work done by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer in trying to learn the root of Bertha's "madness." Instead of treating the issues researched by Freud and Breuer as medical fact, Gilbert and Gubar look at Freud and Breuer's conclusions as further examples of how patriarchal oppression forces women further into a hole where their only escape is to act out in ways considered abhorrent by and for society.

This notion falls in line with theory professed by writers like Jaeger and Bowman, Siebers, Newman, and Darling where disability should not be a medical classification, but a minority identity. Where Freud and Breuer would see such issues like Bertha's as purely medical issues, others note that the conceptions put forth frame the issue incorrectly without considering what it means to have a disease or disability. Unfortunately, Gilbert and Gubar fall into a similar trap where they do not acknowledge the presence of a disease or disability as another facet for examination in their work. That could be chalked up to Brontë's failure in presenting the problems facing Bertha, but it does raise questions on what a more intense concentration on Bertha's disease or disability could yield about the character and the story. Gilbert and Gubar explain in great detail how they explore the identity of Bertha through her gender, and their

conclusion is that Bertha's "madness" exists as a part of a rebellion of her body. Since Gilbert and Gubar conclude that there is no actual disability or disease affecting Bertha, their theory ends up erasing the identity associated with disability even though they identified the problems it causes Bertha. Gilbert and Gubar note stories with *abject* characters like Bertha require that the *abject* character must disappear before the end of the story (78). Sadly, this recognition of the treatment of characters like Bertha did not call for a more in depth look at the cause for such characters being marked as *abject*.

Where Gilbert and Gubar may falter in fully analyzing a character like Bertha, other theorists like Elizabeth J. Donaldson, in her essay "The Corpus of the Madwoman," observes that there is more to Bertha than just a rebellion against the powers that control her. Donaldson acknowledges that Gilbert and Gubar are not looking at the character as having a mental illness, but she also claims that the influence of literature like *Jane Eyre* impacts the real world understanding of disability (14). According to Donaldson, and theorists like Siebers, Jaeger, Bowman, the identity of disability is constructed by the world through media like *Jane Eyre*. Donaldson continues discussing some shortfalls with Gilbert and Gubar and how rebellious attitude for women characters tends to assert a mental illness, which Donaldson does not overly critique and even claims to have helped to understand control structures in psychiatry; yet, she states that such an analysis has become too popular at the expense of a closer and varied look at disability (14-15). Donaldson then tries to apply disability theory to Bertha while maintaining a healthy dose of feminist criticism as well. In so doing, Donaldson can reveal and emphasize thoughts on disability in Bertha by acknowledging how her disability is said to be a result of matrilineal inheritance and reinforces a notion that a woman with a disability will be *abject* and removed from society (21). This statement is similar to the theory posited by Gilbert and Gubar,

but it shows the increased awareness of characters with disabilities. Donaldson differs by offering a cause for Bertha's current state, but she believes that just accepting Bertha's condition as the end result of patriarchal control means that it will shut off an exploration of the possible other reasons for her condition and the treatment she faces from the other characters. A problem with delving deeper into a disability reading of Bertha is that she does not have the presence in the novel to fully understand the extent of her disability and how that relates back to the notion of Gilbert and Gubar where the character is a surrogate for the writer to act out in her own story.

A reading of *Jane Eyre* under the lens of disability theory may not offer much new insight on Bertha not already offered by others; however, it is important to look at a disability angle of Bertha. She has several markers of disability in the text with her inability to participate in society and ultimate removal from the story. Bertha's condition does offer information for the reader, but that information may not appear because Brontë's depiction of Bertha's condition is so sparse and there is no attempt to give the story from her point of view. Instead, Bertha is an object that exists to stop the marriage of Jane Eyre to Rochester until Bertha's demise and Rochester's "disfigurement" make a marriage acceptable. While Brontë wrote Bertha with little characterization beyond her primal tendencies, her inclusion in the story does show an understanding that people with disabilities exist. Unfortunately, her existence alone does little for understanding what it means to have a disability or a disease. Bertha faces the all too common problem for nonverbal characters in that she is not meant to be a character but an object. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys tried to correct Bertha's silence by writing a story about her journey from a child in the West Indies to being locked in an attic in England. Rhys's interpretation gives a voice to a character that was previously silent, but that voice also comes nearly eighty years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*. Rhys does offer a more human portrayal of a character dealing

with an illness or disability that affects her cognitive process, and that indicates the strides the disability community had made during the time of her writing. Even though Rhys's portrayal of Bertha does not mesh well with *Jane Eyre*, Rhys' character shows what a voice can do for a character like Bertha.

Benjy's Voice as a Step Towards Progress

In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner records the decline of the Compson family. Faulkner tells his story using the points of view of the three Compson boys: Quentin, Jason, and Benjy. The story depicts the Compson's decline through the fallen status of the sister Caddy, the suicide of Quentin, and the floundering leadership of Jason. The story unfolds in an experimental manner that relies on first-person narrative recalling events in a nonlinear fashion, but the most intriguing experimental choice was Faulkner's attempt at writing a narrative for a character with a cognitive disability. In the first section of the book, the reader is privy to the point of view of Benjy, the youngest brother and the one with an unknown cognitive disability. Faulkner's experimentation with Benjy as a primary narrator is progressive compared to other novels that portray cognitive disability. For example, both *Jane Eyre* and *A Land More Kind than Home* never let the reader learn the thoughts of the character who has a disability. Instead, their existence is only for other characters to react to for the sake of developing the story. Benjy is in some ways a revolutionary character because his portrayal affords him a voice that is absent from similar characters. However, Benjy's portrait is not devoid of problems as Faulkner relies on stereotypes of a person with a mental disorder to construct Benjy's character. Even though Benjy has some traits that make his character problematic, Faulkner's attempt at building a narrative conveyed through Benjy is a change that makes a character with a disability an actual character beyond just being a plot device. This change is a rare achievement when it comes to characters with a cognitive disability.

Benjy's relationship with his family exemplifies the change in attitude of showing compassion for individuals with disabilities during the time Faulkner wrote. The family member closest to Benjy is his sister, Caddy. In the story, she is the only family member who looks out

for Benjy, and because of this closeness, Benjy becomes overly dependent and bizarrely aware of the life of his sister. For instance, Benjy is able to tell when his sister loses her virginity (Faulkner). Sadly, the familial connection for Benjy dwindles over the course of his life. Benjy would have his name changed, his sister leave, and his care relegated to the servants of the Compson family (Faulkner). These changes would have negative repercussions for Benjy because he will be moved to an asylum by his brother Jason (Faulkner). Benjy's ability to connect with the emotions or life events of others, like knowing when Caddy loses her virginity, puts him in danger of being a savant character as cautioned by Jaeger and Bowman. According to Jaeger and Bowman a character that displays superhuman abilities becomes a "supercrip" which further removes the character from humanity (97). However, Benjy's voice undercuts this notion by adding a dimension to Benjy that makes him appear more real to other counterparts with disabilities. Benjy's voice, flawed as it is, grants readers the opportunity to view Benjy as a more complete human.

There are two main traits that showcase Benjy positively as a character with a disability. The first is that although most of his family want nothing to do with him, they still ensure that they meet his needs to the best of their abilities. The second and most important trait is that Benjy has a voice in the first place. Most of the members of his family do feel shame in some way for Benjy. For examples, his mother changes his name to avoid people associating Benjy with her relative, the family pawns him off on his caretakers, and he is subject to abuse from some of his family members. Also, Faulkner writes in an appendix for the novel that he is castrated for a presumed attack on a woman, and that he spent the final years of his life in a state asylum after his mother's death and brother's need to get rid of the burden of his care. All that

said, his situation as a visible part of the family with caretakers shows that he is better off than Bertha and similar characters.

Benjy is a difficult character to approach for an analysis due to being a complex character that is difficult for readers to understand. Theorists differ on whether or not his portrayal is progressive, or if it is just another lackluster attempt at including a character with a cognitive disability. Two theorists writing at different times take two separate approaches to how they read the character. The first is Cecil L. Moffitt in the article "A Rhetoric for Benjy" where he discusses the extraordinary experiment that Faulkner took to write such a character as Benjy. The other theorist is Maria Truchan-Tataryn in her essay "Textual Abuse: Faulkner's Benjy" where she takes a far more critical approach to Faulkner's use of Benjy. Moffitt pays close attention to the innovativeness of Faulkner in his construction of what Moffitt considers to be an accurate representation of cognitive disability. Moffitt asserts that Faulkner achieved Benjy's portrayal by focusing on the few stimuli that Benjy could comprehend which were his five senses (39). Moffitt backs up his claims with an intense look at the language Faulkner employs for Benjy such as noting that his phrasing is designed to react to the story and not participate in it (41). Moffitt uses these arguments to assert that Benjy is not only accurate but an amazing example of Faulkner's superior writing style.

Truchan-Tataryn is at odds with Moffitt's article. She even opens her article discussing how the acceptance of Benjy as an exemplary character with a disability does not take into consideration the ableism in doing so (159-60). Truchan-Tataryn claims that eugenics played a much stronger role in the novel than other theorists like Moffitt believe. Faulkner does acknowledge the plight of those with disabilities, but Truchan-Tataryn also shows how his writing serves to continue constructing myths surrounding those with disabilities (161). This

notion is clear when one looks at the works of Jaeger and Bowman, Siebers, and Newman, who describe the ways in which disability is a constructed identity, and that Faulkner does use stereotypes when it comes to Benjy. Nevertheless, Truchan-Tataryn believes that Benjy and *The Sound and the Fury* could offer inclusion to people with disabilities because Benjy has become such a focus for disability studies (172). These two interpretations highlight the difficulty of reading Benjy, but Truchan-Tataryn's is more in line with modern disability theory due to how it constructs aspects of Benjy that perpetuate the image of a person with a cognitive disability.

Jaeger and Bowman look at different types of representations they see for characters with disabilities and Benjy would fall under the term of "supercrip" (97). A supercrip is any character whose disability grants them a supernatural power thus making the character exceptional to the point of not being human. In the case of Benjy, he is able to sense the feelings of others and experiences events happening concurrently with his acute senses triggering his memory. The first ability manifests itself when Benjy feels that there is something wrong with Caddy as well as her losing the scent of trees (Faulkner). The idea that a person with a disability somehow gains an ability to help correct it is what Tobin Siebers would call a social construct designed to erase the disability itself by making it inconsequential (33). Benjy's perceived power does not necessarily make up for the suggested loss caused by his disability, but it shows that Faulkner believed there was a trade where Benjy gained the aforementioned abilities by losing some cognitive function. The main problem with using this idea as fact is that it serves to create a bigger wedge between those with disability and those without it. Essentially, the almost super power acts as another difference to what is considered normal, and thus the person with the disability becomes marked as further removed from society's norm.

Although it is confusing and nearly impossible to find a coherent structure in Benjy's section of the book, the fact that he communicates at all to the reader is an uncommon feat for literary characters with a cognitive disability. Without his voice, Benjy would be just another literary device working as a metaphor for the corruption and demise of the Compson family; instead of being a metaphor, however, he offers insight to a story that is unknown to the other characters. Due to his inability to speak out, Benjy's narrative offers little in the way of actual insight to his feelings, but the reader does see how Benjy reacts to situations and what his reactions reveal about the plot of the story. For example, Benjy's narration relies heavily on the scent from pig pens to flapping clothes and most importantly is the scent of trees he associates with his sister Caddy (Faulkner). Benjy's intense sensations also help to distort the story even further as they do not focus much on the actual events of the story. Peculiarly, Benjy also experiences the events of the story happening at the same time. For instance, the opening section of the book details a moment where an adult Benjy catches his clothes on a nail and he associates it with an experience where his sister has to unhook his clothes from a nail when they were children (Faulkner). The goal of creating such a narrative structure would be to show the mind of a person with a cognitive disability thinks only in fractured thoughts untethered from reality. This untethering also allows Faulkner to play with narrative styles and time in his book which he was well known for in his writing. Sadly, the experimentation has little basis in reality and appears as just a way for Faulkner to test his writing style. Although Faulkner takes a progressive step in writing Benjy, Benjy's status does not preclude him from criticism of his portrayal as there are quite a few missteps from Faulkner when it comes to portraying Benjy and his disability. Specifically, the way his disabilities separate him from others and portray him with otherworldly powers show a severe misunderstanding of what it means to have a disability.

The further one moves away from normal, the more likely he or she will become *abject* as defined by Kristeva. Benjy encompasses this notion of *abject* especially when looking at Kristeva's discussion of corpses that have "encroached upon everything" (3) much like Benjy's place in the family as a great source of shame for most of the characters with the exceptions of Caddy and Dilsey. Faulkner's appendix also supports the notion that Benjy is *abject* when his brother sends him away to an asylum after his mother dies. Kristeva claims that actions like Jason's are an expectation of society for the *abject* body to be cut out of it like an animal (12-13). Even though Benjy stands as an improvement to the portrayals of such characters, the ending still requires his removal from society. Despite his removal in the appendix, I must note that Benjy does stay with the family at the end of the original story. Faulkner's change could be an understanding of the cruelty faced by people with disabilities, but even with that knowledge, Faulkner still ends up using some traits that make Benjy a problematic character.

If one were to reduce Benjy into a single metaphor, it would be the decline of the Compson family and the old South as a whole. The novel takes the interactions with others and uses them to understand their characters. For example, Benjy experiences both cruelty and kindness from other characters, and readers will base their thoughts on the characters based on their treatment of Benjy (Faulkner). One of the more obvious ways that Benjy brought shame to his family is that his birthname was originally that of his uncle Maury, but due to his disability, his family chose to change it to Benjamin (Faulkner). Surprisingly, there is some critique of this decision from other characters like Dilsey, the African-American caretaker, who believes that the change was meaningless (Faulkner). Dilsey's reaction points to an understanding of how the Compson family treats Benjy poorly, which suggests that there was some consideration on the part of Faulkner to show that Benjy deserved better treatment from his family. Although Caddy

shows a great deal of care for Benjy, her presence in the story suggests a problematic portrayal for Benjy because his over reliance on her fits into the common stereotype that men with cognitive disabilities require the help of women to function.

For much of Benjy's section, the only force in the novel that has any sway over him is that of his sister Caddy. Caddy is the only positive influence on Benjy, but their relationship is an example of another common stereotype for male characters with disabilities. Patrick McDonagh theorizes in his book *Idiocy: A Cultural History* that men with cognitive disabilities became overly reliant on women to help them survive (94). McDonagh asserts that this is meant to emasculate men with disabilities because a man who was incapable of "self-regulating" is not a man who can fit into society (95). Benjy and Caddy follow this type of relationship with Benjy's intense focus on his sister, and her treatment of him means that their relationship falls into McDonagh's description. For an example, Caddy sticks up for Benjy when their family mistreats him (Faulkner). Caddy's relationship does strip away Benjy's masculinity, and it goes further into infantilizing the character because his reaction to problems without Caddy is to weep. Caddy served the purpose to emasculate Benjy, but her actions are never to cut him down but to show care. Even though there are semblances of kindness in the treatment and portrayal of Benjy, a lot of the stereotypes used hint at Faulkner utilizing an awareness of eugenics in how he decided to display the character. Faulkner mirrors Brontë in using the "science" of eugenics but his approach shows disdain for it where Brontë accepted it as fact.

In a disturbing turn, Faulkner included in the appendix to his novel that Benjy had to undergo castration for an undisclosed transgression with a young girl (Faulkner). The forced sterilization was meant to prevent so-called undesirable traits from passing down to another generation, so anyone undesirable had to undergo treatments that were barbaric. Sterilization was

a popular choice, but there were some who called for forced lobotomies on those they felt needed it (Jager and Bowman 35). The reality for people with disabilities is that many considered them a black mark on society that people wanted to disappear. The critic Sara Newman discusses how people with disabilities became the focus of such movements by the fact that they were the “exceptions” to the population and if they could not rectify those with disabilities, then they would ensure that there was little chance for the people to pass on their genes (132-33). Faulkner was aware of the eugenics movement and included it in his book with the threats for Benjy to go to an asylum or the fact that he had to undergo castration. Faulkner’s inclusion of eugenics does not vilify disability directly. If any assumption is true, it is that he knew that the reality for Benjy Compson was a miserable one if he did not have a family to look after him, and as the family crumbled, that thought became a reality for Benjy.

In many ways, Benjy is a truly innovative character, but he is not without his flaws when it comes to having a disability. Although the speech used by Faulkner may not be accurate for the character, it was a revolutionary attempt to write such a character. The fact Benjy has a voice or at least thoughts available to the reader means that his character exists and grows. Unfortunately, a lot of the stereotypes that Faulkner used to make Benjy undercut his character. Nevertheless, Benjy is a product of a time period where visibility for people with disabilities was growing, but the existence and popularity of eugenics meant that Benjy’s portrayal would not be wholly positive. Benjy is an important character in disability studies because he represents a change in how to portray such a character, and even if Benjy’s existence has not led to as much change as hoped, he still stands as a turning point for the portrayal of disability.

Stump's Regression to an Inactive Object

In Wiley Cash's *A Land More Than Kind Home*, the reader follows the demise of a family in a small rural town. There are three narrators offering their perspectives on the story, but the character with a disability who acts as the catalyst for the story is not one of them. Instead, the character dies off page. In Cash's novel, the Hall family suffers through the death of their son and brother Stump who has a cognitive disability. His death comes at the hands of a local church claiming the want to heal him only to beat him to death under the assumption that there is evil causing his disability. Stump does not get any characterization beyond his disability, and only serves as a symbol for his parents' failed marriage. Stump appears to have little to no agency, and is reliant on the actions and thoughts of other characters to shape him for the reader. While Benjy was an attempt to provide a voice for such a character, Stump appears to regress to the point of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* where he exists only to have other characters react to him.

Most disability theorists feel that the portrayal of characters with disabilities in fiction has not progressed to the point that they wish, but there are some, like Rosalyn Benjamin Darling, who feel that there have been great strides in making disability more visible. Darling states that views on "disability have changed over time" for the better (33). Darling credits this positive change to interactions people have with friends and family who treat those with disabilities better than in the past (34). This change appears somewhat in *A Land More Kind than Home* by the way Jess and his father interact with Stump, and their reactions to his death. According to Darling, there is a verifiable trend with people of disabilities having a more positive self-image (47-49). The assumption made is that society's change to the portrayal of characters with disabilities in all forms created an opportunity for those with a disability to not see themselves as *abject*. Unfortunately, Darling does not delve deeper into the role of media other than it being a

societal influence, but it does help readers view portrayals of disability with a critical lens. While the character of Stump is wafer thin, his family's voices offer insight into their feelings for him. His three immediate family members show at different times that they care for him, and only one of those members treats him poorly in the novel. Until the fateful event at a church healing session, readers could assume that the whole family interacted fine without much problem. Sadly, Stump's death is a result of his mother's inability to come to terms with her son's identity. The reaction of the mother makes the portrayal of Stump problematic because it becomes a counterexample to Darling with an immediate relative treating Stump as *other* to the point of his death. Jess and the father could help back up the notion that having media that shows the character as having a supportive family is imperative for their well-being, but the mother's actions only serve to continue many negative assumptions about people with disabilities.

In his brother, Jess Hall, Stump has a family member who looks out for him, and never feels that he is less for being related to him. Throughout the story, and especially after Stump's death, Jess shows that he does not view Stump as the problem others did. He is also the only character in the novel who interacts with Stump as another character. Since Stump does not have an opportunity to construct his character, it is almost entirely on Jess to do so. From the beginning of the novel, Jess tries to look out for his brother from taking care of his belongings (Cash 29) to trying to protect him when the congregation is "healing" him (50). The entire adult congregation of the church attempts to heal Stump by abusing him, and Jess's yell, misattributed to Stump, stopped the congregation's violence (Cash 51). Jess is also the only point of view the reader has for seeing someone close to Stump deal with his death. Among the other family members, he is not acting out of vengeance or fear of what happened, but regret that his brother died. Conversations pop up in the book where Jess shows great concern over the fate of his

brother and he hopes that they will reunite in the afterlife (Cash 153). Jess's sensitivity towards his brother shows a quality that resonates with the readers, especially when compared to the actions of the other character in the story which seemed to care for Stump even with his disability.

Stump and Jess' father stands opposed to his wife and does not show any outward misery over Stump's disability. That said, Stump's death was a traumatic experience for him, but his reaction switches from sadness over the death to rage at those responsible for it (Cash 123-25). This change in attitude suggests that the father, while upset over the death of his child, is equally angry that his spouse deceived him (Cash 266-67). The blending of emotions makes the father's true motivation difficult to understand as he waffles from depression to rage in the novel. Sadly, his resolution comes after he kills the pastor and the sheriff guns him down to prevent him accidentally killing his son (Cash 292-94). Cash's portrayal of the father is to show a man who cares deeply about his children without worry of any disability, yet the lack of scenes showing Stump and his father together and happy overshadows the positive associations. Although there are flaws with their relationships with Stump, Jess and the father's relationship with Stump highlight a promising change in the portrayal of characters with disabilities. Jess and the father support Darling's idea on the portrayal of family caring for a person with a disability, but this line of thought is not fully accepted by other disability theorists.

Where Darling sees a definite positive change in the portrayal of disability, theorists like Sara Newman and Charles A. Riley, II still find many issues with said portrayals. Both Newman and Riley believe that the media continues to construct disability with no input from those who have disabilities. Newman suggests that rapid changes in the sharing of information should lead to positive changes in portrayals, but that such changes must deal with the lack of access to said

information for all people, especially those with disabilities, and that the information also suffers from online communities normalizing a body to not have a disability because it threatens the “neatness” of the community (179-80). While Cash does not commit any errors in regards to Newman’s concerns, he does show a fundamental misunderstanding in writing a character with a disability but forgetting to make the character a proper one.³ Newman also places a lot of importance in the notion that those with disabilities need to write their experiences to share them with others (182). Cash does not share a disability with Stump, nor would somebody with Stump’s disability manage to write a novel about it; furthermore, Cash’s portrayal removes any pretense that Stump is an ordinary literary character who happens to have a disability.

Similarly to Newman, Riley claims that the media approach to disability has always been flawed. Riley cites two articles in particular for this problem. The first is that a writer Riley respects had a well-researched and well-written article on the disability rights movement moved to the opinion column of the health and wellness section of a popular paper (12). Riley believes that the media relegating all issues of disability as health ones as a problem that makes discussion on a disability identity impossible (12). Of course, the media trivializing disability in such a way makes the work done by theorists like Siebers and Bérubé impossible as the cornerstone to their definitions of disability theory is that it is a social construction. In a similar vein to the above thoughts, Riley tells a story about a critically praised bit of writing on disability that did little more than to make the people without disabilities involved feel better about themselves for helping those who could not (64-65). An assertion like Riley’s sours the characters of Jess and the father. Instead of the characters being genuine friends and family to

³ There is a lot of debate over how to portray a well-rounded character with a disability, but Bérubé and Siebers agree that such a character should be a flawed human that challenges the construction of disability.

Stump, Riley's reading suggests they are treating him like an object. It changes the dynamic of the characters when one considers Jess as a good brother looking out for Stump, only for the possibility that Cash uses the situation to make Jess look like a saint for helping out a character with a disability. As stated several times above, this situation could have some justification if the audience could know some of Stump's thoughts.

Where Benjy's thoughts are made available to the reader in great detail, Stump never communicates beyond a few nonverbal interactions with his family. There are many similarities between Cash and Faulkner's novels from having a character with a disability as a focus in the story to using the first-person perspective split among several characters. When it comes to differences, one of the main ones is that Benjy's thoughts are available to the audience, but Stump never speaks out beyond some body language that others interpret for him. Stump's presence in the story is more in line with Bertha's presence in *Jane Eyre*. On paper, Benjy's communication should mean that his character appears as the more progressive one, but Stump's portrayal does a modicum of understanding of contemporary thought on what makes a positive character who has a disability. Although Stump does show some traits of progress, his voiceless, static character and the presence of disability stereotypes indicate that Stump is not quite a full-fledged character that happens to have a disability. In fact, Stump's inclusion in the story revolves around him being a metaphor for his family and community who look at his presence as a part of the decay surrounding them. To stop Stump's objectionable existence, they choose to take drastic actions when they remove Stump from the community by killing him at a church meeting designed to "heal" him.

Before his death, the two most important parts of his character are his disability and his problematic nickname. Before discussing the problems introduced by his disability, it is

important to understand the reasons given for why everyone in the story refers to Christopher Hall as “Stump.” Stump earned his nickname from a traveling salesman who makes a joke that a kid who stands in a field like a stump must be a great thinker (Cash 208). Stump’s father rebuffs the man, yet he is the one who started referring to his son in such a way to the chagrin of Stump’s mother. The parents disagree on how to identify Stump, and this problem is indicative of their marital issues that stem from Stump’s existence. On the one hand, Stump’s mother views the nickname as an insult to her child that advertises his disability of which she feels ashamed (Cash 207). On the other hand, Stump’s father takes to the nickname after initially rebuking the salesman showing that he is aware of the joke at the expense of his son but felt that it resonated enough to begin calling his son Stump. The reader should want to side with the father and his position on the name as he stands in opposition to the church and pastor that leads to his family tragedy, but it shows that Stump’s father was willing to let his son’s identity be defined only by his disability. On surface level, the use of the nickname looks like the continuation of the joke made by the salesman, but the other side of the argument believes that Stump should stay Christopher because having a disability is shameful. Ultimately, the father is shown to have a better understanding of Stump as a person in that he never shows the same regrets as his wife who tries to terminate a possible pregnancy out of the fear “[i]t’ll be like Christopher” (Cash 219). Even though the father’s opinion has more weight than the mother’s because of her fears, it also creates problems for Stump’s character. Stump is no longer a child with a disability; instead, he is the punchline of a joke.

Stump’s name became a punchline in the novel, and he also only exists as a metaphor in the story. Since illness and disability often appear as one in the same in novels, Susan Sontag’s “Illness as Metaphor” applies to Stump’s character and his use in the novel. For example, Sontag

asserts that illnesses or disabilities of a mysterious origin are thought to be contagious and that others would want to avoid the possibility of further infection (678). This thought appears in Cash when Stump's mother worries that she could give birth to another child with a disability. One difference for Stump is that the town does not shun him outright, but they do try and fix the problem and treat him differently than other children. Sontag notes that the most common concepts that illness stands in for are traits deemed unwanted by society (683). In her example, Sontag notes that cancer and tuberculosis usually highlight the idleness or sloth of a character (Sontag 683). Stump's traits are not as negative as Sontag's examples, but his mother and others treat his disability similarly resulting in the religiously charged attempt at healing Stump (Cash 81-82). While there is shame tied up in Stump's disability, Cash does not make it clear that is what his disability stands for because those who believe that the disability is shameful are portrayed as the villains in the story. However, Stump's disability does stand for more than just a contagious force of corruption as Sontag states. Stump's inability to communicate with others stands as a metaphor for the decay of his parents' marriage and the decay of the community surrounding the church. From the moment of Stump's birth, his mother was unsure of how to treat him since Stump did not act like a baby should (Cash 209), and when considering the other examples over her regrets with Stump like his name and need for the church to cure him, Cash shows that it was impossible for her to come to terms with his disability. Instead of letting the story and Stump allude to the divide between the parents, Cash has one character explicitly state that the birth of Stump signals when the parents began to drift apart (215). The drifting apart of the family could be seen as divine will with the pastor claiming that there is something evil in Stump that needs to be fixed.

An interesting topic in Cash's novel is the use of religion to show the cruelty to Stump. Jaeger and Bowman claim that many religions and the art they produce treat disability as an object that serves a purpose either to make people humble or to warn against the possible role of sin in causing disability (114). Both of these traits appear in *A Land More Kind than Home*. Stump becomes an object for the worshippers because he represents a mistake that only God can fix, as the pastor claims that there was a force preventing Stump from talking (Cash 227). Jaeger and Bowman do not find any particular fault with religion's treatment of disability when compared to other aspects of culture, but Cash is aware enough that some thoughts within various religions make allowance for harsh treatment for those with disabilities under the guise of treating them. This idea calls to mind how many fraudulent pastors like Chambliss exist to "heal" people of their demons. Cash's understanding of the religious influence on disability hints at a progressive idea about disability, but that does not extend much further when it comes to Stump's portrayal. Nevertheless, the use of religion does highlight another way that society ignores the disabled identity in favor of making it an issue not associated with being a part of a person. Since the reader knows nothing of Stump besides the words of others, Cash cements his status as nothing more than a metaphor. Without a voice like Benjy, Stump is relegated to just being an object for others to interact with in the novel.

Writing a character with a cognitive disability is difficult because no one can know how accurate a depiction it is. It is a problem not only with Stump, but with other characters as well. The previous sections show both sides of the coin, but for Stump, that increases because his portrayal comes after the surge in disability theory texts. From the conclusions drawn above from other theorists, an accurate portrayal of a character like Stump is out of reach. Nonetheless, that does not mean that no one should attempt to write such a character. It only means that it is

difficult to do so well. For example, a great deal of Cash's novel would change if the audience had access to Stump's voice. If Stump could make his thoughts available to the reader like Benjy, he would no longer serve as a metaphor for what is happening or as an object meant for others to observe. Rather, his character would become an opportunity to explore his world as a real person. That is the point of writers like Darling, Newman, and Riley. They believe accurate and human portrayals of characters with disabilities will lead to them becoming better recognized and better treated in society.

Conclusions

The main problem with these portrayals is that they do not challenge the construction of disability. Instead, they fall in line with most depictions of disability as they exist to help the story as objects and not characters. Of course, the above characters are not all depressing images of how little depiction of disability has changed. There's a world of difference in the treatment of the three characters with Bertha's forced imprisonment, Benjy's family that mixes love and cruelty, and Stump's positive relationship with his brother, but ultimately their purpose in these stories is to help create the characters of others while being pushed to the edges themselves. There is some level of improvement in these stories, but the results are minimal and do not meet the hopes of theorists that they could be a stance against the construction of disability. Instead, the characters become common tropes with moments of hope for characters with disabilities, which is all too common for those characters that are nonverbal.

The three characters discussed above all have a cognitive disability or disease that prevents them from communicating with others. The use of a nonverbal character means that it is unlikely that they will be a real character, and out of the three mentioned only Benjy has that opportunity to exist as one, yet he still becomes an object for readers to judge the other characters for how they treat him. Even though the prevailing hope is that letting such characters interact with the reader will lead to better representation, authors rely on tried and true stereotypes of disability and disease that do not challenge the notion that it is a social construction. Although some positives exist in the characters, writers need to create well-defined characters with thoughts and goals that challenge the construction of disability and disease for both to no longer be *abject*.

My thesis presents just a snippet of disability studies and the portrayals of those with disabilities. Disability and disease are inseparable from culture, and their popularity in literature and other media exemplify that. However, the portrayals of disability and disease have stagnated as can be seen in the above popular novels. A problem with studying disability and disease is that the separation and overlap is murky between the two and the fact that characters can have a mix of disability and disease that affects both physical and cognitive functions further blend the possibilities of the field. There needs to be an examination into how this divide helps to continue the idea that disability, especially cognitive, is *abject*. When there is a better understanding of the construction of disability, then research would be better equipped when exploring disability in relation to other minority identities. We could learn how a character's gender, race, sexuality, etc. is affected by and changed by disability and disease. In order for these changes to happen, readers need texts that depict disability beyond object status. Due to the increasing number of titles across all media that portray disability, it has become more normal and has led to better treatment for people who have a disability. These portrayals tend to come from writers that have the disability they are writing about, like Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*, but there are no major works written by someone with a nonverbal disability. Another area for study is the fascination with those who cannot communicate and how writers choose to portray them. There are slight hints of progress of inclusivity, but not to the level that matches the hopes of disability theorists. One hope is that greater representation of disability and disease in media will lead to greater understanding by society, but those representations need to challenge the status quo, or else portrayals of disability and disease will go unchanged. An important revision to making characters who confront the construction is to let characters, especially those with cognitive

disabilities, participate in the story as humans with realistic thoughts and actions instead of just being objects.

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