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Treatment of the Differently Abled: Representations of Disability from Victorian Periodicals to Contemporary Graphic Narratives

Rachelle Echevarria
University of Central Florida

TREATMENT OF THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED: REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY FROM VICTORIAN PERIODICALS TO CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

by

RACHELLE ECHEVARRIA

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of efforts have been made to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic institutions, the workplace, and to examine and analyze representations of marginalized populations in a variety of literary and cultural contexts. These efforts usually acknowledge past mistakes, emphasizing the idea that history shall not and should not repeat itself. While analyzing the representations of disability is important in its own right, it's also important to understand why these perceptions exist. This thesis suggests that when the representations of disabilities from different mediums and from different time periods are examined in relationship, readers may gain a better understanding of society's perceptions not only of disability, but of people with disabilities. Among other issues, this thesis will note recurrent patterns in these treatments of disability, including whether there is any form of resistance to the predominant narrative about disability. Put in its simplest terms, the intent of this thesis is to consider the effect time and contemporary politics have had on people and on their beliefs about disabilities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my mom, my dad, and meine Brüder, who believed in me when I faltered, picked me back up when I fell, and reminded me to keep my faith.

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Introduction

Society's expectations of marginalized groups directly affect how these groups are perceived and represented, and this is no different for disabled groups. While art is often said to imitate life, these artistic imitations are frequently skewed by bias of one sort or another. Thus, a consideration of the societal beliefs and perceptions of certain groups is necessary to understand the context and history that helped shape art for the purpose of properly recording social and historical developments. Literature is always representative, made up of the aesthetics of societal perceptions and the beliefs that lay the foundations for these perceptions.

Disabled characters are most commonly represented as "less than" in literature, particularly in comparison to other characters. They often play the role of the victim, the villain, the mystic, or are represented as secondary to the development of other characters or plot elements. In other cases, these characters have things magically go right for them. And, often, narratives that depict their conflicts or hardships are not enhanced by their disability. This makes disabled persons seem more than capable, but their disability is only a secondary consideration to the story. This category of being "less than" something else reflects biases that suggest that disabled characters are less than normal by conventional social standards. They represent the alien or the Other, which often equates to being thought of as less than a person.

These representations of disability culminate into the aesthetic of disability as ideas and images of what disability should be are summoned in the minds of readers. The aesthetic of a disability in literature is more than just the appearance or roles disabled characters are categorized into. Jasmine E. Harris defines these aesthetics of disability as "visible sensory and behavioral markers that trigger particular aesthetic and affective judgements about marked

individuals," encompassing both the physical attributes of disabled and behavioral attributes of disabled characters (819). As such, the term "aesthetic" extends to beyond what the eyes can see and into what the mind can infer, moving beyond the casual observation of disabled characters and into the critical analysis of disabled characters. How these characterizations are made—the mindset and beliefs from which authors write these characters—ultimately define the type of character being written, and thus the character being represented. Historically, with marginalized groups, this characterization has been more negative, if only due to certain prejudices that have existed and that have prevailed both socially and politically.

Over the last two hundred years, cultural representations of the disabled person have developed in a variety of important ways. This is true whether the representations come from popular cultural forms such as comic books or graphic novels or more elite forms such as literary fiction.

Chapter 1: Exhibition, Creature, Wretch: Deviancy in the Victorian Periodical

If there were a medium of literature that defined the Victorian era, it would be the periodical. As a general matter, Victorian literature emphasizes "the qualities of man that distinguish him from 'natural' creatures and shows him to be 'civilized,' moral, or ethical, which become synonymous during this period" (Timko 627). Michael Timko claims this is due to the Victorian cultural symbol of engagement that occurred as a result of the major developments of the time. He writes that Victorians felt "the overpowering impression…of tremendous changes occurring" in a way they hadn't before, which made them consider "their own time as an era of change from the past to the future," (610, qtd. in Houghton 1). Victorian periodicals were also often the first place that British novelists published, and they served as training grounds for their later fictional works.

The inclusion of fiction in periodicals expanded readership. In her essay "The Advantage of Fiction: The Novel and the 'Success' of the Victorian Periodical," Laurel Brake claims,

> the appropriation of fiction into the wide maw of the press is comparable to claims to cover as wide a geographic area as possible for news contents as well as distribution, or publishing at multiple intervals to reach different consumer groups (early and late editions), or including closing prices, law reports, racing news, and/or theatre reviews to attract different niche audiences. (12)

This is not to say that all Victorian periodicals contained fiction since there were a wide range of periodicals like research journals and labor journals. It is instead to say that Victorian periodicals appealed to the masses, both the articulate and the uneducated, because the inclusion of fiction helped balance the less digestible nonfiction that appealed primarily to scholars and the more

educated class. The serialization of periodicals and the cheaper cost of serials only added to the appeal for the readers of all social classes.

Of particular importance to an understanding of Victorian representations of disability is an acknowledgement that Victorian periodicals are "essential sources or background material for understanding Victorian literature and history…periodicals were understood to construct, not merely reflect, the culture within which historical events and literary texts took shape" (Hughes 317). Following the 1832 Reform Act, these periodicals began to shift their focus from the reformation of the political system to the exposure of social injustices, particularly those created by a rapidly changing and increasingly urbanized and industrialized environment. With the understanding that Victorian periodicals helped construct the Victorian culture, the growing readership of periodicals during this era can be attributed to the reflection of Victorian values, as well as an influence on Victorian society. Roger P. Wallins asserts that it was "in the eighteen-thirties that conscience had been slowly emerging from its sleep when the intellectual and literary periodicals recognized the social evils of urban life" (57).

The Victorian periodical reflected an emerging social conscience, and Charles Dickens is perhaps the most well-known author contributing to this phenomenon. In an essay he wrote during a bout of insomnia titled "Lying Awake," an essay that records his disconnected "train of thoughts" as he lay awake one day, Dickens briefly alludes to Londoners' behavior towards those who suffer from "accidental injury, or any kind of illness or disability":

> This particular public have inherently a great pleasure in the contemplation of physical difficulties overcome; mainly, as I take it, because the lives of a large majority of them are exceedingly monotonous and real, and further, are a struggle against continual difficulties, and further still, because anything in the form of accidental injury, or any

> kind of illness or disability is so very serious in their own sphere….It always appears to me that the secret of this enjoyment lies in the temporary superiority to the common hazards and mischances of life; in seeing casualties, attended when they really occur with bodily and mental suffering, tears, and poverty, happen through a very rough sort of poetry without the least harm being done to any one—the pretence of distress in a pantomime being so broadly humorous as to be no pretence at all. (6.147)

Although Dickens would seem to be mainly using the word "disabled" here in a generalized way to mean a "lack of ability (to discharge any office or function); inability; incapacity; weakness" ("disability, n."), there is also an implication that Victorians typically felt superior to the disabled. From what Dickens observes, it is common for members of society to suffer and struggle with "accidental injury, or any kind of illness or disability." The members of society who don't experience this same suffering and struggling seem to enjoy considering the possibility of overcoming these obstacles, using this simple form of entertainment as a diversion from the monotony of their lives.

One of the most revealing examples of this attitude is found in Arthur Symons' essay (which was published with an accompanying sketch) entitled "Bertha at the Fair," published anonymously in 1896 in the periodical *The Savoy*. "Bertha at the Fair" reveals the narrator's disturbing interest in a maimed woman named Bertha and could be read as almost reverential of the female body had Bertha's disfigurement not been foregrounded in the story. There's an almost erotic quality to the story that could easily be considered a fetishization of Bertha's disfigurement, a treatment of it as a spectacle, which goes beyond seeing her body as simply beautiful. To Symons, Bertha's attractive qualities exist *because* she was maimed, and the narration of the story is closely focused on this.

Symons first describes Bertha in a simple sentence that compares her to the other women he encounters while on a trip to Brussels: “But Bertha was different” (87). It’s a simple statement that doesn’t make a judgement, though readers will soon find out why she is different. Bertha is a part of what was commonly referred to as a “freak show,” the kind that would typically take place at local fairs. “Though the nineteenth century brought diminishment of the fairground traditions and the closure of Bartholomew Fair,” Lillian Craton observes, “Victorian society did not set aside its connection between bodily spectacle and popular entertainment” (25).

It is clear that Bertha is a spectacle on display at a freak show for she “apologized for taking the place of the fat lady usually on exhibition” (Symons 87). Like the common trope of the “fat lady,” she was another unusual body to be gawked at. Symons writes that Bertha “fascinated us all” (“all” here includes the narrator, the publisher, his friends, and a painter) with her “strange, perverse, shifting eyes, the colour of burnt topazes, and thin painful lips…she was scarred on the cheek” and “one of her breasts was singularly mutilated; she had been shot in the back” (87). He was fascinated with Bertha as an object in an exhibit, a commodity that has been placed on display for circus visitors to enjoy in a demeaning spectacle that ultimately objectifies the subject being exhibited.

Symons dehumanizes and fetishizes Bertha when he claims, "You can have no idea how grateful I was to Bertha… Never did any woman so charm me by so celestial an ignorance… And then she was a snake-like creature, with long cool hands” (88). The narration implies a certain amount of pleasure is derived from Bertha’s ignorance which inspires Symons’ own amusement and ego. He knows that his intelligence far outweighs her own, and he revels in speaking with a “creature” that not only looks inhuman but is unable to uphold or understand conversation in the same way as Symons. When Symons attempts to describe what a poet is,

Bertha appears incapable of grasping the concept of what a poet or poetry is. Symons claims that Bertha understands a poet to be "cafe-chantant singers. That was the nearest she ever came" (88). One could conclude, then, that Bertha is mentally and physically disabled, perhaps with a learning impediment, and that Symons' reaction implies he considers her less of a woman—a person—and as more of an object of amusement, a spectacle, an exhibition, a freak of nature, and as a creature.

Although it is only one story, Symons' "Bertha at the Fair, A Sketch" does suggest that Victorians often felt a sense of superiority towards members of the disabled community, ultimately finding persons with disabilities and unusual bodies amusing, while pretending to be superficially charmed. Victorian society frequently dehumanized people with disabilities because they were pantomime-like spectacles to the largely able-bodied society, which has the tendency to reinforce a discriminatory sense of the disabled as the Other.

Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Adventure of the Crooked Man," which was published in *Strand Magazine* in 1893, also reveals this sense of superiority, not through amusement or fetishization as in Symons' essay, but through dehumanization. The *Strand* was perhaps best known for featuring Sherlock Holmes and helped popularize the little magazine in the late-nineteenth century. Its identity was striking not only for its content, but for the imagery that aroused a distinctly Victorian sense of place. When George Newnes first launched the *Strand* (the first volume appeared in 1891), he wrote that the magazine would "[supply] cheap, healthful literature," meaning he hoped to improve the cultural awareness—the health—of his readers and community (3). The *Strand* presented realistic crime and detective stories to appeal to a popular audience as well as realistic portrayals of Victorian society and its behavior to contemporary people and phenomena. "The Adventure of the Crooked Man," which reflects this

focus, features a disabled character who is portrayed negatively. This portrayal raises questions about Newnes' interpretation of "healthful" literature and about the kind of cultural education and awareness he was trying to teach to his readers.

Unlike "Bertha at the Fair," Doyle's "Adventure of the Crooked Man" is not a personal account but fiction, though Doyle's story is just as degrading as Symons'. The story has Sherlock Holmes investigating the death of a Colonel. The Colonel leaves behind a widow—Mrs. Barclay—who was briefly described as having been "temporarily insane from an acute attack of brain fever … her own mouth, poor darling, is closed by illness," the implication being that this reaction occurred as a result of Mrs. Barclay having witnessed her husband die (27). According to Audrey Peterson, "brain fever" "was known as inflammation of the brain … a recognized medical entity at the close of the eighteenth century" (446). The term has a more colloquial use as well, connotating a heavy emotional state that could be construed to be unstable, like Catherine Linton's inflamed emotional state in *Wuthering Heights* that leads to brain fever and ultimately contributes to her death. Such is the case with Mrs. Barclay, who is described as having been insane because of brain fever, and it is implied that she has become mute due to this brain fever. The brain and how it functions is delicate, so it's certainly possible that an inflammation of the brain could lead to muteness, or Mrs. Barclay's state of muteness could be attributed to shock.

The descriptions of her disabilities, however, are met with sympathy, unlike that of Bertha or the main suspect—Mr. Henry Wood—who features in Doyle's story. Furthermore, her disability was met with an explanation of how it came to be, whereas the characters in the story didn't try to understand the circumstances of the disfigurement of Henry. Mrs. Barclay is described as a "poor darling," whereas Henry is described as having a "fearsome face" and as

being a “crippled wretch,” “deformed man,” and “dreadful looking creature” (Doyle 27-28). There are a few reasons why Henry’s ailments might differ so drastically in description from Mrs. Barclay’s, with social class and the aesthetics of disability playing a large role in this stark contrast in these representations of disability.

Mrs. Barclay had been married to a Colonel, a man of status whose reputation is only heightened by his military status; Henry, however, is ambushed by the enemy while serving overseas for the military, and thought to be dead, he is horribly mutilated and ultimately “twisted” with “a back like a camel and…ribs all awry” (Doyle 29). He has no money, no identity, and no social relevance. His masculine disposition only feeds into the more derogatory language— “fearsome,” “wretch,” “creature”—as it made him appear more menacing. In contrast, Bertha, who is just as visibly mutilated, is only described as looking strange like an animal, but there is nothing that implies she is to be feared or hated. Her appearance is fetishized. As such, Mrs. Barclay can be considered the disabled antithesis of Bertha and Henry: she is disabled, though the invisibility of her disability and her social class imply that her disability has been met with sympathy and pity, and not dehumanization.

Mrs. Barclay’s more positive representation can be attributed to the fact that Mrs. Barclay appears to be of “the norm,” meaning she is not immediately identifiable as disabled, and she appears rather fit. Thus, she is not treated like a creature in the manner that Henry is. With that said, it’s important to note that Henry is not villainized at the end of the story; he is not the killer but is instead a witness to Colonel Barclay’s unfortunate demise.

The tone shifts after Henry begins to describe the origins of his deformities. Doyle writes that Henry is “a poor thing huddled before the fire” (29). Doyle’s use of the word “poor” in relation to Henry and his disability elicits sympathy, just as it had for Mrs. Barclay. And yet it is

not until Henry Wood's disability and disfigurements are recognized as the result of tragic events rather than birth that this sympathy is elicited. Despite these feelings of sympathy or pity, the story suggests that Victorians often felt superior to the likes of Henry, a man considered to be a "dreadful-looking creature," as he was immediately suspected of being dangerous and fearsome due to his physical demeanor (Doyle 27). In humanizing Henry's character by offering him sympathy, Victorian society still dehumanized him by initially villainizing him. The implication is that Victorians saw those who are unusually-bodied or differently abled to be inferior to their normally-bodied counterparts. Disability, however, is not always as visible as Henry's own disfigurement, but it can be notable in behaviors expressed.

In 1865, Charles Dickens published a Christmas special of the literary magazine *All the Year Round*, a periodical that he founded and owned. This issue contained a story entitled "Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions" that features a character named Sophy, Doctor Marigold's adoptive daughter who is deaf. "Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions," is intended to be a progressive social criticism of Victorian social attitudes towards the disabled as it depicts a character with disabilities and in a popular magazine. Its relevance is especially important since Dickens himself is commonly thought to be a highly representative figure in the Victorian period.

This particular short story is revealing because it is simultaneously heartbreaking and humorous, and the interactions with disabled characters are substantially different than those featured in "Bertha at the Fair" or "The Adventure of the Crooked Man." Doctor Marigold (that is his first and last name, not his title) is a cheap-jack who travels from place to place, selling his wares from a cart, often at arbitrary prices that he gradually cheapens over time. In Dickens' story, he suffers the loss of his child, wife, and dog within a short period of time. Whereas some

readers might have expected him to become cruel in a similar manner to Dickens's character Ebeneezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, Marigold instead continues his trade and eventually befriends a man—a "giant"—named Pickleson who works for a "master" who travels by caravan (6). Readers can infer that Pickleson is a part of a traveling circus with his master being the ringleader.

Although Pickleson is not the most important character in the story, he is important as the representation of a disabled character. He is said, for instance, to have a "little head and less in it, with weak eyes and weak knees," possibly a reference to acromegaly (6). According to an 1849 article in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, acromegaly is an affliction characterized by "an acquired hypertrophy of the upper and lower extremities, and of the head...slight deformity of the joints...deafness and blindness" and "hypertrophy of the tongue" ("Acromegaly"). Pickleson fits the description of acromegaly as it was known at the time, and the smaller head can easily be explained by the condition elongating the face rather than widening it, making it appear narrower and smaller when compared to the growth of the body. Marigold's attitude towards Pickleson is refreshing: he doesn't show any impatience towards Pickleson, despite his slower speech, and he listens to the alleged giant with rapt attention. This attentiveness works out in his favor, for it is Pickleson who mentions his master's stepdaughter—a deaf girl—whom his master hates and has been trying to get rid of.

Sophy, as Marigold will name her after his previous child, is described as "deaf and dumb" (6). She's unable to hear, and so she doesn't learn to speak; she is both deaf and mute, cut off from communicating with the majority of society. The term "dumb" in this sense means "destitute of the faculty of speech," a specific usage of the word that originated in Old English ("dumb, adj. and n."). When one is born deaf, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to learn to

utter words or sentences with the use of one's vocal organs as the deaf person in question has never had the chance to hear any words or sentences. Hence the commonly associated terms "deaf and dumb," a phrase symbolizing a cause and effect. However, to be dumb did not mean people were always so understanding of those who were deaf, nor does it suggest the complicated nature of educating them in a language they've never heard. In *An Historical Sketch of the Asylum for Indigent Deaf and Dumb Children, Surrey*, an unidentified author writes that "the uninstructed Deaf and Dumb must be…useless and burdensome," which is the attitude that Pickleson's master held towards Sophy (iv).

Unlike Pickleson's master, Marigold is immediately sympathetic towards Sophy. This is not because of her disease, though, but because of her circumstances and—perhaps—because the ghost of a previous Sophy haunts Marigold's memory. Dickens writes that "the poor girl had beautiful long dark hair, and was often pulled down by it and beaten" (6), and Marigold is brought to tears at seeing a reflection of his deceased daughter, who had died due to a lack of proper care from her parents and abuse from her mother.

Marigold's attitude towards Sophy must be considered within the context of his past experiences and Sophy's separate pasts and how that translates into Victorian views about disabled people. Marigold sees Sophy, a vulnerable child who looks so much like his deceased daughter, as an opportunity to right his wrongs and to purify his soul in a way that will atone for his sins. But Marigold is not the rule, but the exception. Pickleson's master, though he is only briefly mentioned, is a more accurate indicator of how society treats people with Sophy's afflictions. In this case, she's assumed to be a lost cause.

The idea of being useless and a burden to society, as Sophy is thought to be, reflects real circumstances, as is suggested by an examination of Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the*

London Poor and its interview with a "crippled" street-seller of nutmeg graters. The article is entitled "The Crippled Street-Seller of Nutmeg Graters" and was published in the 1851 edition of *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopedia of the Condition and Earning of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*, a book that compiled the newspaper articles Mayhew wrote for the *Morning Chronicle* and that documented the state of the working class in mid-Victorian London.

At the beginning of the "Crippled Street-Seller of Nutmeg Graters," Mayhew provides "an example of one of the classes driven to the streets by utter inability to labour" (329). In his interview with Mayhew, the street-seller describes himself as a "creature," and thus dehumanizes himself in a manner similar to Doyle's character Henry. The street-seller of nutmeg graters reduces himself to something less than human, likely as a result of dehumanizing experiences he has suffered from society. For example, Mayhew describes an incident an informant of his witnessed regarding this seller, wherein a landlady and her son quite literally through him out of their establishment. The informant describes the seller as a "wretched man" and "poor creature" (333). Mayhew is suggesting that this particular street-seller lives in poverty because of his disability, a consequence of an elitist societal structure influenced by the opinions of those in "high places" who do not "bestir themselves to improve the condition of a class of people of whose misery, ignorance, and vice, amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of the 'the first city in the world…' a national disgrace" (iv).

Circumstance certainly has a role to play in how people with disabilities are treated in general, but circumstance in the Victorian period typically divided the normal from the deviant. To be "deviant" was to exist in a world that saw disability as "the expansion of degeneration theory—the idea that the human race might degrade in moral, mental, and physical health

(Hingston 1). Mayhew—being the social reformer that he was—was intent on being accurate, and almost pedantic, in his articles. He described this street-seller of nutmeg graters as a "noble example" of a street-seller whose "countenance is rather handsome" (330).

Mayhew's style of journalism in *London Labour* was largely made up of interviews, and it becomes clear that the nutmeg-grater seller sees himself a certain way because of how society sees him. While being interviewed by Mayhew, the street-seller describes the loss of his mother and the impact it had on him: "She and the party as I was brought up with was the only friends as I had in the world—the only persons as cared anything about a creature like me" (331). He dehumanizes himself in a manner similar to Henry in "The Adventure of the Crooked Man." The term, within the context it is used, implies that Mayhew also describes an incident an informant of his witnessed regarding this seller, where a landlady and her son quite literally threw him out of their establishment; the informant describes the seller as a "wretched man" and "poor creature" (333). This behavior indicates the superior-minded behavior Dickens described in "Lying Awake," and the language—within the context of previous texts analyzed—makes the featured subject of the Mayhew's article appear less of a member of society and more of a nuisance, a sort of pest. The article on the street-seller of nutmeg graters is short but powerful. Society's disposition towards the man has led him to a life of poverty on the streets, and, in one memorable case, he was literally thrown into that lifestyle without a chance to achieve more.

An important duality runs through the Victorian periodical articles under consideration: dehumanization and superiority. The two tend to have gone hand-in-hand, and perhaps the reason for this is because disabled bodies are seen as abnormal. Lennard J. Davis writes, "When we think of bodies, in a society where the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (13). "Deviancy" is a word often associated with criminal matters,

separating the crime and criminal from the normally functioning society. And it can be inferred that the representations of disability in Victorian society depict an essentially ableist society. Victorian society was made up of a hierarchy politically and socially, but disabled people didn't fit into this society; they were neither poor, nor were they rich, but they were most often considered spectacles, dehumanized as "exhibitions," "creatures," and "crippled wretches." Victorian society finds the disabled inhuman and incapable of being "civilized, moral, or ethical" because they committed the crime of existing and encroaching on an otherwise "normal" society.

Chapter 2: War, Trauma, and Loss of Bodily Function: Reality in Graphic Narratives

The transition between the Victorian and Modernist periods is reflected in many ways, including in developments in literature. Whereas Michael Timko described Victorian literature as reflective of the civilized, moral, and ethical qualities of people, John Bell Henneman writes that literary modernism strived "to break down all barriers of speech and race and become world literature" (161). The trend of modern literature—such as the novel—saw writing as more reflective of the time, critical of reality by trying to capture divergent thinking and feelings in consideration of the rapid changes the modern period experienced. Modern sensibilities that developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century were spreading rapidly at the turn of the twentieth century, leading to "an explosion of creativity in the arts, [a transformation of] moral values, and … [a reshaping of] the conduct of life throughout Western society" (Singal 7). The modernist novel was seen as revolutionary because it "expressed itself as radical formal innovation pushing against the conventions of realism" (DeKoven 333).

Joshua Kavaloski writes that there is "an implicit yet widespread understanding that high modernism involves the artistic culmination of modern literature in the 1920s" (2). The interwar period that followed the First Great War saw cultural phenomena like the Roaring Twenties and the Harlem Renaissance, but members of the Lost Generation documented the more ambiguous nature of post-war culture and recovery, indicating that "the official cessation of hostilities between nations did not coincide with the end of war's consequences for its victims" (Koven 1169).

Shifting Narratives: Disability Post World War I

The interwar period following World War I saw new developments in representations of disability. Whereas Victorian periodicals painted a broad picture of society's attitudes towards disabled people, usually from the perspective of an able-bodied individual, the modernist novel that was in fashion after 1918 featured more uncomfortable and less detached depictions of disability. Aesthetics of disability featured in the modern novel are indicative of the impact World War I had on disabilities, which had become highly visible due to the unprecedented scale of destruction experienced in the First World War.

Virginia Woolf was one of the more prominent authors to feature disabled characters in the 1920s. Her novel *Jacob's Room*—first published in 1922—is a modern elegy that evokes a sense of irrevocable loss. It follows the life of the titular character Jacob, but it does so primarily through an omniscient narrator who knew Jacob and important moments in his life, emphasizing a more psychological and experimental narrative rather than one focused on plot or traditional structures of storytelling. Readers eventually must come to terms with Jacob's death in the Great War, reconciling themselves with the fact that they never really get to know Jacob.

Towards the beginning of the novel, readers meet Mrs. Barfoot, a character who is not very memorable, if only because she is barely featured. She is described as an "invalid" who requires assistance to move, implying that she is paralyzed or extremely weak (Woolf 13). Though Woolf does not go into detail about her, she writes that Mrs. Barfoot is "civilization's prisoner" (23). Her physical circumstances leave her unable to move freely and without assistance, and the trappings of her body leave her isolated. Though her disability is quite noticeable, Mrs. Barfoot isn't mentioned very often, nor is her disability all that relevant to the novel's plot. However, Woolf describes Mrs. Barfoot's disability as if they put her in a position

of power. They quite literally demand attention: for example, the bath-chair man who assists Mrs. Barfoot—Mr. Dickens—is required to help Mrs. Barfoot move. "'Move me,' she would say to Mr. Dickens…and again, 'That'll do'" (23). The interactions between Mr. Dickens and Mrs. Barfoot are a revealing play on power dynamics and their imbalances.

Where Mr. Dickens considers himself "a man, [who] was in charge of Mrs. Barfoot, a woman," he forgets that it is ultimately Mrs. Barfoot in charge of their dynamics, even if it is her husband who employs Mr. Dickens (24). His condescending and misogynistic thoughts on their relationship are clouded by the pretentious nature he adopts due to his assumption that he is in control of her. When Mrs. Barfoot requests the time, Woolf writes that Mr. Dickens "took out his great silver watch and told her the time obligingly, as if he knew a great deal more about the time and everything than she did" (24). Woolf implies that Mr. Dickens assumes he knows something Mrs. Barfoot doesn't, though by the end of the interaction, readers discover that "Mrs. Barfoot knew that Captain Barfoot was on his way to Mrs. Flanders," the woman he's having an affair with, when she had asked for the time (24).

This interaction is ironical: the other characters assume Mrs. Barfoot was a victim of life's misfortunes—if not a hindrance on Captain Barfoot, a "tumour" one must bear with until it is cut—but she proves to be much more than that (13). Though she is not featured often, the characters associated with her—Mr. Dickens and Captain Barfoot—are among the few disabled characters in the book. The nature of their disabilities seems to emasculate them, but they assume that their role as men makes them superior to Mrs. Barfoot. However, she manipulates her disability to her advantage, strategically utilizing it to play an intellectual game. It is a game that she and the readers know she is winning, but that the other characters are losing, especially since they don't even know they're playing.

While Mrs. Barfoot is a relatively complex representation of a disabled character—even if her disability could be seen as a means to excuse extramarital affairs—D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* features a character who more closely captured the harsh realities of the Great War's effect on society's attitudes towards disability. *Jacob's Room* is a tale of loss that uses the aesthetics of disability in essentially subtle and sometimes indirect ways to reveal different power dynamics. In contrast, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* directly deals with the effects of a man who comes home from war irrevocably changed by his participation in the war and plays on tensions between the mind and the body.

The story follows the spouses Constance and Clifford Chatterley. Shortly after their honeymoon, Clifford becomes paralyzed while fighting in World War I. Though Constance (or "Connie") pities Clifford, she is unsympathetic and condescending, having an affair with the gamekeeper of Clifford's estate, Oliver Mellor, while simultaneously dehumanizing Clifford. In the tenth chapter, Lawrence describes Connie's perfect man after she has a particularly brief and passionate rendezvous with Oliver that leaves her pondering on her adoration. Afterwards, she goes home, and while she sews and Clifford reads to her, she begins to fantasize about her perfect man and contrasts him to Clifford:

> She could feel in the same world with her the man, the nameless man, moving on beautiful feet, beautiful with phallic mystery…. But Clifford's voice went on, clapping and gurgling with unusual sounds. How extraordinary it was! How extraordinary he was, bent there over the book, queer and rapacious and civilised, with broad shoulders and no real legs! What a strange creature with the sharp, cold inflexible will of some bird, and no warmth, no warmth at all! (140)

Connie equates masculinity with the ability to move on "beautiful feet," an ability that Clifford is now incapable of due to the nature of his injury. Connie emasculates him, stating that "he has no real legs," a statement that is untrue but that is symbolically relevant. She proceeds to equate this new version of Clifford a "strange creature," opposed to giving the status of "man" to Clifford like she did for her "nameless man."

As is the case in Woolf, Lawrence plays on social dynamics like class and gender, but disability plays a more critical role in these dynamics than it did with Mrs. Barfoot. Lawrence's representation of disability does, however, fall into some common tropes that fail to be fully sympathetic to the disabled. Clifford is depicted as an impotent, emotionally weak, vain, and condescending man of upper-class status *despite* his disability. The psychological trauma that could have been a unique narrative point of discussion doesn't exist because Clifford's disability isn't written as a key aspect of his characterization. Instead, his disability is used to excuse Connie's affair and highlight the physicality of Oliver, shifting the focus of the disability away from the character who is disabled.

Despite these limitations, the modern novel saw a significant shift in disability representation that was more insightful than those of Victorian representations due to authors featuring streams of consciousness that better reflected attitudes towards the disabled. While the language in *Jacob's Room* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was at times dehumanizing, disabled characters were beginning to feature as important figures with their own stories, even if their roles were still limited to mostly supporting roles. Regardless of any power dynamics being discussed or criticized, the disabled figure was, at least, no longer being dismissed.

The Rise of Contemporary Comics and Graphic Narratives

The modernist novel maintained its popularity through the 1930s and after. By the 1940s, though, the unprecedented destructiveness of the Second World War, and a variety of other social and culture changes, had begun to inspire new forms of writing. One of these was the graphic narrative, which greatly increased in popularity during the 1940s. This popularity culminated in what became known as "the Golden Age" of comics—the birth and mass consumerism of modern comics from World War II to the mid-1950s, early 1960s—and a transition into the current contemporary period and its literature.

While Victorian literature often sought to represent people as civilized and modernist literature sought to subvert many of the conventions of realism, the post-World War II period is influenced by the tragedies experienced in World War II, resulting in the rise of critical consciousness, which, according to Sean Carleton, "helps people to see themselves as both the products and potential changers of their circumstances" (161).

In recent years, graphic narratives and comics, which have been commenting on society for the better half of a century, have seen a resurgence in a variety of other forms, most notably the rise of comic-based cinematography. They are explicitly tied to the contemporary period and society's beliefs, especially the desire for change. In fact, much like periodicals and novels in their respective periods, they might be considered to be revolutionary. I am using the phrase "graphic narrative" as a modified version of how Pascal Lefèvre uses it, a term that "encompasses the comic book, *bande dessinée* [comic strip], and Japanese *manga*…. American superhero comics, Japanese shojo manga, graphic novels and many more" (14). This term will be used interchangeably with comics, graphics novels, and manga. To provide a broad understanding of graphic narratives or—as it is commonly categorized in *Understanding*

Comics: The Invisible Art— "comics," Scott McCloud has defined it as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce and aesthetic response from the viewer" (9).

The growth of the graphic narrative as literature occurred because of the contemporary rise in critical consciousness, reflecting creators' desires to change their circumstances. These desires to change circumstances resulted in original interpretations of disability, beginning with (and largely centered on) the superhero.

The Supercrips

Superman, Batman, and Captain America are among the most well-known superheroes to appear in comic books during the 1930s and 1940s, with Captain America comics having Captain America directly fight Adolf Hitler at one point. There are many lesser-known superheroes who are just as significant, if less popular, especially when considering representations of marginalized groups like individuals with disabilities. Among the first disabled superheroes to debut was Doctor Mid-Nite, who first appeared in 1941 in *All-American Comics no. 25*.

Three different individuals have taken the name of Doctor Mid-Nite, but it's Charles McNider who features in the origin story for the comic hero. The comic opens by introducing Charles McNider, a doctor, working on a serum that will allegedly save thousands of lives when a man who appears to be police officer runs in to his practice. The officer claims a man named Brown is dying, so the doctor agrees to go to him. On the way there, the officer explains that the man "is an important witness against 'Killer' Maroni, the Racket King," the head of a dangerous gang or mob, and that one of his mobsters had shot the unnamed dying man (Reizenstein 1). One

of the men wanting to get into the good graces of “Killer” Maroni (the writer makes a point of keeping this term “Killer” in quotation marks throughout the comic) discovers that McNider had been sent to save this man’s life, and in an attempt to finish the job, he throws a “hand grenade of death and destruction” into the building that kills everyone but McNider (2). And it is this event that is crucial to his superhero origin story. The blast blinds McNider, forcing him to wear bandage coverings over his eyes and forcing him to retire from medicine. To continue helping people, he sets about writing crime and detective tales to spread awareness and hopefully bring justice through his stories, but he feels as if he’s not doing enough. One night, as he considers how to do more, “a sudden thunderstorm, a bolt of lightning, and a frightened owl crashes through the window,” startling McNider (4). It is at this point that he instinctively takes off his bandages to see what’s happening, and to his shock, he can see. However, when he turns on the light, he loses his ability to see. Thus, readers discover that McNider has an odd case of day-blindness.

Doctor Mid-Nite is born when McNider, being the scientist that he is, invents special goggles that allow him to see during the day, as well as giving him the benefit of anonymity. With that, and a willingness to fight crime and right the wrongs of the world, Doctor Mid-Nite becomes a heroic figure. Doctor Mid-Nite was pivotal for his time. He was one of the earliest disabled superheroes who was actively overcoming severe trauma while being featured in multiple issues of a popular comic series, and he was created during the early 1940s, at a time when the world was experiencing one of the most traumatic events in history, the Second World War. “Doctor Mid-Nite: How He Began” was innovative in choosing to remove a significant bodily function—human sight—that is one of the body’s most important senses for information input.

Other Golden Age comics of the time featuring disabled characters—particularly heroes—had similar narratives. *Whiz Comics no. 25,* published by Fawcett Comics and continued in DC Comics, featured a character by the name of Freddy Freeman. Freeman is a newsboy who is disabled as a result of the actions of the villain Captain Nazi, and he needs to rely on crutches to move around as he is now a "cripple for life" (Herron 12). Initially, he was dying at the hands of Captain Nazi when Captain Marvel—the superhero alter ego of Billy Batson—saves his life by sharing his powers with him. Freeman obtains powers that occur only when he shouts "Captain Marvel!", which turn him into his superhero alter ego Captain Marvel Junior (15). In doing so, his disability becomes null, returning only when he shouts "Captain Marvel!," again to shift back into his civilian self. As Captain Marvel Junior, Freddy has superhuman speed and strength, he can fly, and he has enhanced wisdom, among other things. He could essentially live a disability-free life, at least as long as he never shouts "Captain Marvel!" while assuming his alter ego.

Superhero comics featuring disability are infamous for the recurrent stereotype of the "supercrip," but especially so during the Golden Age of comics. A disabled character's disability features primarily as a footnote in a character's story rather than as a serious point of conversation and characterization. The term "supercrip" in its broadest terms describes a binary of disempowerment and empowerment, albeit one that developed following the modern period. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Modernity secularized wonder into the stereotype of the supercrip, who amazes and inspires the viewer by performing feats that the nondisabled viewer cannot imagine doing. Contemporary wonder rhetoric emphasizes admiration rather than amazement…respectability now deems it inappropriate to delight in staring at disabled people" (60-61). As it is broadly understood, the supercrip character enforces a narrative that separates

mind from body. It's impossible for readers of graphic narratives to understand the depth and impact of disability due to the rhetoric emphasizing a character's miraculous triumph over the disability without ever delving into the psychological, sociocultural, and economic impacts of being disabled. The supercrip in this context is one-dimensional. The figure of the supercrip, however, isn't necessarily a bad one. It's the stereotype associated with it that implies something negative. While the binary of the disempowered (referring to disability) and the empowered (referring to outrageous, beyond average, and even superhuman abilities) can seem dated and out of touch, the supercrip develops over time, even if the stereotype associated with it continues to be a point of discussion.

By the 1950s, comic books were increasingly associated with rising juvenile delinquency, which resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority: "The code sets standards for comic book writers and artists. It covers both editorial and advertising matter, concerning the topics of characterization, costumes, dialogue, plot, marriage, religion, sex, violence, and vocabulary. The purpose of the code is to assure parents that the material within the comics is reasonably wholesome" (Wright 159). The code was enacted in 1954, and a notable shift in the content of comics can be traced to the mid-1950s. Comic books of the Golden Age focused heavily on narratives based on trauma, having little or no substance outside of featuring a traumatizing event and the rather easy overcoming of that event. With the introduction of the Comics Code Authority, traumatizing events like a "hand grenade of destruction and death" that blinded a lone survivor who was also a public servant were condemned. Suddenly, publishing companies were forced to change their narratives to accommodate the code and to fit changing times. Ultimately, these changes made for more complex and diverse stories that are also widely regarded to be better than their predecessors. Because the code enforced more "child-friendly" content, the so-

called “Silver Age” comics (from the late 1950s onward) were often fantastical, lighthearted, and outlandish in a comedic way. At the same time, there was also a revival of the superhero genre that seemed outdated following World War II with the rising critical conscience that led to a variety of social movements, including the countercultural movement of the 1960s.

The countercultural movement, and the widespread protests of American involvement in the Vietnam War, introduced a number of non-Western beliefs that rejected classic American ideals. One disabled superhero embodied the time and epitomized the Silver Age of comics: Dr. Stephen Strange. In 1963, Steve Ditko—with the writing of Stan Lee—introduced the world to this surgeon turned mystic. Commonly referred to as Ditko’s creation, Dr. Strange first appeared in *Strange Tales no. 110*, but his origin story wasn’t given until *Strange Tales no. 115*, both of which were released in 1963.

“The Origin of Dr. Strange” is an eight-page story that depicts how Dr. Strange journeyed into the mystics to become the “Master of Black Magic” (Lee 8). Dr. Strange is notably arrogant, vain, and selfish. Having been in a car accident that severed the all the nerves in both his hands, Strange loses fine motor control over his hands and, subsequently, his ability to perform surgery. In a desperate attempt to be what he once was, he travels to India in search of man referred to as “The Ancient One” for a miracle, but the miracle is not given freely (2). The Ancient One insists that no one can be healed unless they deserve it and proceeds to “peer into [Dr. Strange’s] brain—into [his] memory” to learn the truth about him (2). He views the memories of Strange’s accident and diagnosis, and he offers Strange a deal to study the mystic arts under him, to which Strange immediately disagrees because he doesn’t believe magic to be real despite his hopes for miraculous healing.

The Ancient One does not let him leave to go home just yet, and so Dr. Strange wanders around. His bitter and logically inclined countenance, though still there, begins to soften after viewing odd scenes that could only be explained by magic, but his stubbornness prevails. Eventually the story comes to a head with Strange agreeing to train in the mystic arts with The Ancient One to protect him from his mentee, Mordo, who is plotting against him. This sets off the beginning of his journey into becoming the Master of Black Magic, with Lee explaining, "Slowly he changed…slowly his life took on a new deeper meaning…slowly he prepared himself for the epic battles ahead" (8). Once described as having become a "drifter…little more than a human derelict" following his accident, Dr. Stephen Strange shifts the narrative of the supercrip into something more than just empowerment and disempowerment (3). Sami Schalk explains,

> The people and characters represented in this type of supercrip narrative in many ways exceed their own embodiment through their abilities, to the point where their status as disabled may be called into question…. We might also consider, for example, the difference between Spiderman, who gets his hyper-able, spider-like powers after being bitten by an irradiated spider, and Daredevil, who goes blind from exposure to radioactive material, yet develops increased power in his other senses. While Daredevil's disabling accident continues to mark him as disabled, Spiderman's does not. In our discussions of supercrip narratives, then, we should consider what constitutes disability (materially and socially) in the context of high-tech assistive devices, altered abilities, and fictional worlds. (82)

With Schalks' consideration of supercrip in mind, readers should note an important shift in the narrative of the supercrip between the Golden Age and the Silver Age. Doctor Mid-Nite and

Captain Marvel Jr. were meant to be uncanny and unbeatable beacons. The characters barely acknowledge their sudden inability to function as they once did, and their abilities actively neutralize any impact their disability would have had on them mentally, socially, economically, and physically. In contrast, Dr. Strange acknowledges all of these. He places his value in his ability to conduct surgery and is noticeably desperate to fix his hands. His arrogance is unbecoming, but he humbles himself, even going so far as to say, "Look, I'm not a surgeon anymore, but I'm still a doctor…you need rest" (Lee 5). Dr. Strange was written as criticism of mainstream Western beliefs, but he is also important because he represents a disabled character of depth, even if his disability is largely forgotten about after he obtains his powers. This representation has its flaws, especially as his disability isn't mentioned much again, but the magic never does give him the ability to conduct surgery again. Instead, he forges a new path.

Barbara Gordon's character, the iconic Batgirl (not to be confused with Betty Kane's preceding "Bat-Girl"), had a similar premise when she was disabled, though it took an entirely different route. Barbara Gordon is a key character in DC Comics, featured primarily as a character involved with Batman. She was first introduced in 1967 as the daughter of the Gotham city police commissioner James Gordon as well as Batgirl. Like much of the Bat-family, Barbara had no special abilities. She simply fought crime, and in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, she suffered the consequences for it. A character whose disability was depicted in the Dark Age of comics, Gordon's story was intrinsically tied with trauma, but not in the passive manner that Doctor Mid-Nite's or Captain Marvel Junior's stories were written; her trauma was raw and uncomfortable to read about, and it is often credited for appearing genuine despite the unrealistic nature of it all. *Batman: The Killing Joke* was published in 1988 during the Dark Age of comic history. The Dark Age of comics lasted from 1980 until around 2000. It's considered a time in comic history

that is dark and edgy, pushing boundaries in comic book art and storytelling. Its focus was decidedly not for children, centered heavily on sex, violence, and darker, more morally ambiguous portrayals of characters. If the Silver Age focused on fun and goofy stories, the Dark Age directly opposed it.

Batman: The Killing Joke, which is often praised for its writing and illustrations, is a psychological horror or suspense graphic novel that focuses on a largely psychological battle between Batman and the Joker, who has just escaped Arkham Asylum. The Joker plans on driving Commissioner Gordon insane to prove that it could happen to anyone after a bad day, so he goes to his home to kidnap him, shooting Barbara in the process. Barbara suffers a spinal injury from the shot, and she is unfortunately left paralyzed. While *The Killing Joke* is often praised as a comic book masterpiece, it is not central to Barbara's story as a disabled individual. It just informs readers of how she became paralyzed and lost her ability to be Batgirl. It isn't until 1996 and "Oracle: Year One Born of Hope" (featured in *The Batman Chronicles no. 5*) that the reader learns about Barbara's journey of recovery. She ponders on what she had and what she lost, and the story deals at length with her bouts of depression. At one point she thinks, "I was a gymnast at one time, I was a dancer. I loved how my body moved. Now I just felt conspicuous and clumsy" (Ostrander and Yale 10).

In a desperate bid to learn self-defense while wheelchair bound, Barbara goes to the internet for answers when someone messages her to go to the park. At the park, she meets a homeless man named Richard Dragon. Richard gives her lessons in escrima—the Philippine art of stick fighting—and she gradually becomes physically and mentally disciplined while still confined to her wheelchair. It's in a dream sequence, however, that she seems to rediscover herself. Seeing herself as a walking and standing Batgirl, she encounters the Greek figure "who

speaks for the gods—the Oracle" (14). The Oracle offers her a chance to "trade masks," where the Oracle takes the Batgirl mask and places her own on Barbara (14). Barbara wakes up, and suddenly, she knows what she'll do. She'll take on the mantle of a hero named Oracle who works behind a computer to fight criminals. At the end of the comic, she considers that "a little over a year has passed since [her] old life ended, since [she] died and was reborn. The shadows remain, but only to give contrast to the light" (18).

For a comic published in the Dark Age of comics, the story has a delightfully hopeful ending: Barbara achieves something most people are incapable of doing, and she does it in a wheelchair. Her disability hasn't been negated or neutralized in any manner. Although she is unable to walk and her "high-tech" devices do little to assist her with her disability, she is still able to function well. A little over a decade ago, however, her disability was retconned, a technique "which retrofits the series with continuity by means of a revisionary view of past events" (Denson 277). In 2011, DC Comics relaunched the entirety of their stories, rewriting essentially everything in an era called New 52. Barbara Gordon's injury in *The Killing Joke* was among the narratives rewritten. In fact, Barbara's handicap was essentially erased by undoing the damage done to her, ultimately making her trauma as a disabled character completely null and void in the present, begging the question of whether her disability representation is valid due to its miracle erasure.

The problem of supercrips remains in that the significance of a disability remains a feature to be forgotten or erased. Disability in the supercrip can exist and have depth to its storytelling (as seen with Dr. Strange and Barabara Gordon), but the disability can appear more like a novelty and less like a standard way of living in a character's life. It's difficult to critically analyze the supercrip as the stories of characters featured in the superhero genre are constantly

changing authors, replacing characters, rewriting narratives, and relying heavily on "comic book science," otherwise known as things that have no realistic or narrative explanation; they simply exist and occur to exist and occur.

The Graphic Novel

The graphic novel is an important form of graphic narrative that encompasses a number of genres. For example, *The Killing Joke* is a graphic novel, but it's interchangeably referred to as a comic due to its superhero narrative. Graphic novels were popularized as a medium of literature in the 1980s when Art Spiegelman released the graphic memoir *Maus*. They are an important development in the history of illustration because they allow for narrative and artistic development. The eight-page "Origin of Dr. Strange" can only fit so much information, and it had to be carefully crafted and edited, but the graphic novel presents an opportunity for unprecedented depth of character and emotion. Some of the longest graphic novels are Japanese manga. At well over one hundred pages, they have the space to convey character depth and emotion. In recent decades, manga has spread across the globe and has been influential on graphic narratives in the West. In fact, although the United States was once the largest exporter of graphic narratives, these days Japanese manga dominate the comic and graphic narrative field. It's also true that the influence goes both ways. Koichi Iwabuchi explains: "In this sense [manga] are neither 'Asian' in any essentialist meaning nor second-rate 'American originals.' They are inescapably 'global' and 'Asian' at the same time, lucidly representing the intertwined composition of global homogenization and heterogenization, and thus they well articulate the juxtaposed sameness and difference" (16). The manga *Josee, The Tiger and the Fish* is indicative of this sameness and difference, having been published by Yen Press, which has both Japanese

and American shareholders. *Josee, The Tiger and the Fish* provides an interesting perspective on disability in a way that typical American comics do not.

Josee, The Tiger and the Fish focuses on a college student named Tsuneo and his developing relationship with wheelchair bound Josee, who meet after she literally crashes into him. After helping her home, he becomes her caretaker, a task she makes difficult for him as she despises the idea. She does not take kindly to Tsuneo, but a trip to the beach changes that. Usually, Josee is not allowed to go out. Her grandmother, whom she lives with, forbids it, claiming that Josee "can't protect [herself]" (Tanabe 63). Tsuneo had been hired by Josee's grandmother, who was very firm in stating that Josee could not leave the house. When Josee's grandmother finds out about their escapade and yells at the two of them for going, Josee asks why Tsuneo took her to the beach, knowing it would risk his job, and Tsuneo responds by saying, "You said you wanted to go to the beach, right? I couldn't just ignore you like that" (102). Unlike the Victorian texts "Bertha at the Fair" or "The Adventures of the Crooked Man," Josee is humanized by Tsuneo. She is recognized as a person with feelings worthy of being acknowledged, even if others might find the existence of her with her disability a nuisance. For example, there is a moment that a man is yelling at Josee for bumping into him, even though he had crossed the path of her wheelchair. It's a lot easier to avoid a moving wheelchair than to wheel around a moving object, but the reality is that some people don't care. It's an honest portrayal of living with a disability that doesn't necessarily ignite a sense of pity or sympathy; instead, the story alone is captivating. *Josee, The Tiger and the Fish* just happens to have a disabled main character, and the disability isn't necessarily a trope, but a narrative tool grounded in reality that is reminiscent of genres like the graphic memoir.

One outstanding example of a graphic memoir using disability as a narrative tool is David Small's *Stitches*, a story that recounts the author's childhood. It's a startling account about bodily trauma from life-saving surgery, displaying a coming-of-age story in a society that doesn't necessarily accept you. *Stitches* narrative is quite abstract, often referring to a strong stream of consciousness that balances between the author's dreams and his reality. The title "Stitches" refers to a surgery Small had as a young teenager to remove a lump on the side of his throat. The surgery was supposed to be without complications, or so Small was told, but he ended up having his thyroid gland and one vocal cord removed, leaving him mute: "On the trip home from the hospital I thought: how curious! You go in one day for a supposedly harmless surgery. That surgery turns into two. When you awake the disfiguring lump in your neck is gone. But so is your thyroid gland and one of your vocal cords. The fact that you now have no voice will define you from here on in" (Small 186). He soon enough discovers he had cancer, and that the operation was necessary to his survival, but it's clear that Small is bitter and unhappy. The entire memoir is written in the past tense, acknowledging the memoir aspect of the novel, and so the tone is reminiscent of Small's jaded feeling by the unexpected loss of his voice. He writes, "When you have no voice, you don't exist. Even among my old friends, I felt invisible" (212-13).

For almost a century now, American graphic narratives on disability have largely been treated the same: "disable" a character, but don't make the disability an important plot point. Disability in graphic narratives is more often used as a novelty to attract attention rather than to add substance to a story, and if it does add a semblance of substance, the disability doesn't maintain its importance for very long. While *Stitches* doesn't necessarily end unhappily, the novel does the unpleasant task that many narratives on disability don't, and that's allowing the

reader into the psyche of the disabled individual. It's as much a study on trauma as it is disability, perhaps a better example of writing them both post-World War II than any superhero comic could do, much less those of the Golden Age.

That shouldn't discount the superhero narrative and its representations of disability entirely, though. One superhero narrative that does capture trauma and disability well is Jordan Hart's *Ripple Effects*. *Ripple Effects* was published in 2022, and it was a collaborative project that sought to reimagine the superhero genre. In a world where superheroes are common, some people now appear to spontaneously develop superhuman abilities. And no explanation is provided for these transformations: one day the characters don't have powers, the next day they do. For the main character, though, there is a caveat. George Gibson is essentially indestructible. A better term might be invulnerable; nothing physical can harm him. Unfortunately, he lives with an acute case of type I diabetes, endangering his life daily despite his invulnerability.

It's a first-person narrative that reexamines the supercrip by ensuring no escape or miraculous cure for his illness, an illness that puts George on a similar plane of existence to the rest of society because exerting himself and putting himself in danger could easily lead to his demise. It makes George's greatest strength and greatest weakness his body, a fascinating take on the disabled superhero. Despite the superhero antics and comic book science, the narrative feels genuine and rooted in reality. Perhaps this genuineness is due to the author's own experience living with a chronic disability, or perhaps it is due to the collaboration between the several disabled authors who contributed essays to the story.

It is true that the narration can seem a little stilted at times, with lines like "Remember when I said your illness makes you a better superhero than all of us" and "Your resilience…it just brings people together" (*Ripple Effects* no. 5). The message, however, is neither patronizing

nor dismissive. Nor do the writers simply get rid of a disability or make it unknown because George always has to carry insulin on him. The story is also honest in its portrayal of relationships between the able-bodied and the disabled, examining the demands society makes of individuals who are recognized as capable of accomplishing great things, even if doing so harms the individual. The graphic nature of these stories forces readers to reckon with reality.

Despite *Ripple Effect's* success in inclusivity, contemporary graphic narratives haven't always represented society's behaviors toward disability accurately. It's difficult to ascertain society's behavior towards the disabled based on these readings: does society mean to erase disability? Or is disability meant to be invisible, hidden by a mask and powers that subvert any true understanding of disability struggles? Are disabled people considered nothing until they can achieve the status of the supercrip, achieving what others typically cannot like the present Paralympians? To what extent can reality properly be portrayed in the superhero genre, and why aren't more graphic narratives that represent disability made outside of that genre? Why haven't more contemporary graphic narratives outside of the superhero genre displayed disability before the past fifteen years or so, and what does that say about portraying the realities of disability accurately and fairly? One thing seems clear: contemporary society, based at least on the representations of disability in contemporary graphic narratives, unfortunately has a very limited understanding of disabled people, their real experiences, and their individual histories.

Conclusion

Understanding representations of disability in literature is complicated. There are many facets to consider: time-period; demographics; an understanding of history, law, and politics; genres of literature; varying attitudes towards different disabilities. Though more attention has been paid to the representations of disability in recent years—particularly due to mainstream media openly featuring characters with wheelchairs, amputations, visual and hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, personality disorders and more—the problem arising from these examinations centers now on how best to use the information these examinations provide. How does examining and understanding existing representations of disability help one better portray the marginalized groups of disabled people in a society that is increasingly more vocal in being fair, accurate, and equal?

In this thesis, I have explored various literary representations of disability to understand society's attitudes towards the disabled within the past two centuries. While bias may be inevitable, up to a point, we must do our best to reject it. There is no one right answer even though assumptions can easily be made with one's general knowledge, but the purpose of advancing scholarship on topics such as these is not to use general knowledge. It is to become an expert in what you choose to discuss.

To further this research, one could focus on the creator's intent and/or the creator's intended audience. For example, it is widely accepted that Dr. Strange is the creation of Steve Ditko, but why did Ditko create him? Did he have a personal connection to disability or medicine? Was he jaded by mainstream Western culture and actively opposing it via Dr. Strange's character? Furthermore, Arthur Symons wrote "Bertha at the Fair" as a personal essay, but for what reason? Did he find the story amusing and think that that alone was enough to

publish in the *The Savoy*? The intent of the author—his or her purpose—would be quite indicative of the societal behaviors toward disabled communities because authors write with an audience in mind; if one could determine the purpose, the audience, and better yet, the audience's reception, then one might be able to better deduce not only society's perception of individuals with disability over different periods of time, but the reasons behind why these perceptions might exist.

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