ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Cripping Literature through Reparative Reading: Gender, Disability, and the Case for Symbiosis

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Readers and literary critics alike have begun incorporating the lessons of disability studies into their textual approaches. This article argues that the disability studies field would benefit equally from adopting the reparative reading practices of literary theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Heather Love. Drawing on these scholars' works, this article utilizes a dual reparative and paranoid approach while exploring intersectional impacts of gender and disability on character portrayal in nineteenth century novels *Jane Eyre* and *Olive*. Subsequent analysis highlights ways in which disability ruptures traditional gender expectations and demonstrates how bodies are pressured into compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. Simultaneously, this article celebrates ways in which these novels champion joyful futures for disabled individuals and portray disabled characters as strong, attractive, and multi-faceted, reinforcing the importance of reparative reading.

In the mid-2020s, it requires significant mental energy to recall a world not yet consumed by so-called cancel culture. This controversial practice — which I define as the societal impulse to shun or boycott individuals, entities, or media deemed offensive — is of particular interest to me when it comes to canonical literature. Aware of the damage that inauthentic, stereotypical representations can inflict, readers are perhaps more likely than ever to confine problematic depictions to the proverbial waste basket.

However, over a decade before this concept captured the cultural zeitgeist, there existed the framework of "paranoid reading." Coined by gender studies and queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), this term encapsulates the practice of reading works with a fine-tooth comb in pursuit of conspiracy or discrimination. Such an objective suspends the reader in futurity, waiting for the inevitable shoe to drop; as Sedgwick clarifies, "No time could be too early for one's having-already-known [...] And no loss could be too far in the future to need to be preemptively discounted" (p. 131). For instance, a reader of *Harry Potter* aware of the author's trans-exclusionary "feminist" ideology may scour the bespectacled boy-wizard's tale for hints of transphobia. With misinformation canonized and marginalized voices lost beneath layers of authorial bigotry, paranoid projects are crucial to authentic storytelling.

Yet, alongside the paranoid, Sedgwick offers the twin approach of *reparative* reading: to simply enjoy a piece for pleasure and insight, not on the lookout for offensiveness. In practice, this might manifest as delighting in the tale of the boy who lived; appreciating textual messages of love and friendship; and debating which Hogwarts house one would be assigned to if genetically lucky enough to gain entry to the school of magic.

Specifically, while analyzing works depicting disability, scholars in the field seem to skew toward the paranoid. In his book *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007), Ato Quayson prefaces literary analysis with the typification of literary tropes surrounding disability, such as "disability as the interface with otherness" and "disability as bearer of moral deficit/evil" (p. 52). By doing so, though he helpfully encourages critical appraisal of damaging literary tendencies, he also stereotypes stereotypes themselves, categorizing tales into neat, negatively-connotated buckets. In their book *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder define their titular term as, among other things, "[their] way of situating a discussion about disability within a literary domain while keeping watch on its social context" (p. 9). The authors' language is strikingly suggestive of a paranoid, watchdog-esque approach, wary of societal repercussions of problematic portrayals. Though the authors do not binarily deem works "positive" or "negative" depictions of disability, their readings still tilt toward blanket approval or disapproval; apparently, the literature they consider either makes a nuanced commentary or simply reifies damaging stereotypes. Finally, in the 2020 documentary *Code of the Freaks*, while discussing problematic choices in 2009's Avatar, Susan Nussbaum asserts that the film "'didn't escape my […] piercing gaze. And I think more people need to have piercing gazes when they're watching movies of any kind, but certainly movies with disabled characters'" (Chasnoff, 2020, 58:29). Again, language tethered to the act of watching suggests an audience constantly on edge and on guard.

This tendency toward paranoia is deeply understandable. Villainous and pity-saturated portrayals of disabled characters from Captain Hook to Tiny Tim litter the Western literary canon. Criticism of problematic or painful characterization is, to be sure, a necessary means of advocacy for the disabled community. However, when taken to the extreme, paranoia-prompted pushback may lead to the dismissal — our outright "cancellation" — of all ableist representations. Indeed, a series of disability advocates and academics interviewed in *Code of the Freaks* cannot name a single film featuring a disabled character that they enjoyed (1:02:50).

Such renunciation may seem beneficial; after all, why should a community long-plagued by discrimination confront problematic works in the present day, especially with a much-needed, burgeoning media focus on disabled joy and power?

Heather Love offers relevant insight in reply. Her work revolves around the LGBTQ+ community which, analogously, has popularly resisted pre-Stonewall media in favor of a gay pride mentality. In her book *Feeling Backward* (2007), she argues that the Queer canon would be remiss to exclude damaging or insensitive media. "As long as homophobia continues to structure our public and private lives and books [about Queer suffering] continue to be so eerily familiar," she argues, "we cannot do without an analysis of the intimate effects of homophobia." Love asserts that such analysis is essential because "without it we cannot remember history's failures, or do justice to our own experience in the present. Celebration will only get us so far, for pride itself can be toxic when it is sealed off from the shame that nurtured it" (p. 127). Love warns that eschewing problematic, painful depictions of a marginalized community may cause members to lose touch with their history, a past which has inevitably shaped their present. Therefore, while ableism in literature — as in all spaces and forms — should be condemned, I argue that it should also be contextualized and considered in relation to the disabled community today. And necessary critiques need not negate coexisting enjoyability of multi-faceted media. Returning to Sedgwick's work, I suggest that paranoid and reparative readings can be performed *simultaneously* to regard literature of disability with the complexity and historicity it deserves.

Indeed, "historicity" is a crucial consideration, for if paranoid reading is rooted in the future, what does this mean for the past and present, particularly regarding texts written decades ago? By reading reparatively, we create space for these temporal zones. The practice's encouragement of readerly surprise and enjoyment mandates an embodied reading experience anchored in the present. Meanwhile, reparative reading's embrace of a piece's pure intentions or positive reinterpretation requires knowledge of its predecessors and cultural context, drawing in the past. To generate as nuanced a reading as possible, then, it is beneficial to read with both of Sedgwick's methods in mind.

I look toward Love and Sedgwick's examples as I investigate an intersectional interest in the realm of literary disability studies: how disability and gender intertwine to uniquely code disabled bodies branded male or female.[1] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" (2007) highlights the necessity and mutual benefit of merging feminist and disability scholarship. These siloed fields, she argues, are interested in numerous overlapping issues, from bodily policing to patriarchal medical control and media representation. The experience of a disabled woman is fundamentally different from that of a nondisabled woman or a disabled man, impacted by the combined coding of femininity and disability. Likewise, the nebulous entity that is masculinity maps onto the disabled body in unique ways. Thomas Gerschick and Adam Miller explore this notion in their article "Coming to Terms: Masculinity and Physical Disability" (1995). After conducting interviews, Gerschick and Miller concluded that their disabled, male subjects responded to their non-conforming bodies by utilizing one of three frameworks: reformulation (reconceptualizing hegemonic masculine ideals), reliance (dependence upon dominant hegemonic masculinity), and rejection (separation from dominant masculinities and the creation of alternatives). They note that characteristics commonly associated with men are at odds with those affixed to disabled bodies: independence, sexual prowess, and strength conflict with the dependence, impotence, and weakness often associated with disabled people. Men must therefore renegotiate their relationship with dominant hegemonic masculinity to come to terms with their disabled selves.

Bringing masculinity, femininity, and disability together, disability writer and activist Eli Clare emphasizes that "To be female and disabled is to be seen as not quite a woman; to be male and disabled, as not quite a man." How did these beliefs originate? Clare convincingly argues that they are an inevitable byproduct of gender's predication on non-disabled status: "The mannerisms that help define gender—the ways in which people walk, swing their hips, […] take up space with their bodies—are all based on how nondisabled people move," he says (2009, p. 130). By these prejudiced standards, then, disabled individuals are destined to fail at "proper" gender performance.

Based on the notion that disability and gender are inseparable — and reinforcing critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's eye-opening call for intersectionality in the early 90s — I consider the textual interplay of both identity facets while analyzing two mid-nineteenth century texts: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Dinah Mulock Craik's *Olive* (1850). While close-reading Brontë's novel, I consider the depiction of Edward Rochester and his disabled masculinity. I then pivot to Mulock Craik's lesser-known *Olive*, whose eponymous protagonist highlights how disabled women were regarded differently than their male counterparts.

In unpacking these texts, I enumerate well-documented ways in which gendered stereotypes have historically punished disabled bodies. However, I offer a *novel* layer of insight in suggesting that, by reading these works with a dual paranoid and reparative approach, we may be motivated to think differently about these intersectional identities and the literature that contains them. Equipped with the lessons of Love and Sedgwick, I look to these texts not only as sites of critique, but as meaningful ways by which to understand the history and present-day circumstances of disabled and gendered populations. Indeed, *Jane Eyre* and *Olive* demonstrate that works written nearly a century ago can still contain content that empowers and excites, even as it demands conversation and critique. By incorporating both paranoid and reparative textual interpretations, I encourage a nuanced view of not only this literature, but the past, present, and future of what is now the disabled community; I demonstrate that just as the teachings of disability studies have benefitted literary analysis, the lessons of literary theory can equally benefit critical approaches to the literature of disability.

Jane Eyre: Shame, Defiance, and Contrived Compatibility

Brontë's bildungsroman chronicles the maturation of the titular heroine Jane Eyre. As a young woman, Jane is employed by the proud and wealthy Edward Rochester, who is introduced as a domineering, stubborn, and nondisabled man. The pair eventually stumble into a fraught, yet passionate romance. After a traumatic incident involving his estranged wife, Rochester becomes blind

and an amputee. The subsequent shift in his persona — and its implications for his marriageability — reveals much about the social stigma that surrounded disability.

After a period of separation, Jane returns to a newly disabled Rochester, finding the formerly proud man awash in self-pity. He is described as "desperate and brooding," "dangerous to approach in his sullen woe" (Brontë, 1847, p. 384). Although Jane assures him that she is not repelled by his blindness, Rochester remains skeptical: "'Jane, you have now, no doubt, friends who will look after you, and not suffer you to devote yourself to a blind lameter like me?'" he inquires (p. 387). Rochester's question is a leading one, implying that it would be foolish and burdensome to wed oneself to a disabled person. Later, Rochester cries, "'If I were what I once was, I would try to make you care—but—a sightless block!'" (p. 388). Here, Rochester distinguishes between his pre- and post-disability self, intimating that his lovability vanished with the onset of his blindness. In claiming to be a "block," he likens himself to an entity not only devoid of mobility and sight, but personality, sexuality, and life. Rochester views his *humanity* as compromised by his injury, revealing the extent of his internalized ableism.

While Rochester feels like less of a man due to his blindness, English and disability studies professor Julia Miele Rodas argues that his amputated arm may, by contrast, reinforce his masculinity. "'What if [...] Rochester's disability is a beautiful thing within the Jane-Rochester sexual aesthetic, his stump manifestly, unapologetically erect, phallic, masculine?'" she questions (Rodas as cited in Stoddard Holmes, 2013, p. 163). Yet a rereading of this scene suggests that Rochester is hardly unapologetic. Rather, he is depressed and horrified as he presents his amputated arm. This presentation occurs after Jane remarks upon his disheveled appearance: "'It is time some one undertook to rehumanize you'" she says, observing the state of his overgrown nails (Brontë, 1847, p. 388). In reply, Rochester admits, "'On this arm I have neither hand nor nails,' [...] drawing the mutilated limb from his breast [...] 'It is a mere stump—a ghastly sight! Don't you think so, Jane?'" (p. 388). While Jane's comment is in jest, its somber undertones are not lost on the reader, nor Rochester; his disability has coded him as less-than-human. The revelation that he lost his hand reads as a shameful confession, forcing him to display the stump once protectively cradled to his chest. Looking upon such a "ghastly sight" sends him back into lamentation. Indeed, he wonders if Jane, too, is repulsed by his form and disinterested in further romantic entanglement. Again, Rochester is self-critical, despairing, and insecure, his romantic capacity — and phallic capability — questioned rather than asserted. I am thus more inclined to accept David Bolt's reading of the amputated arm and blindness as "symbolic castrations," diminishing Rochester's perceived normativity and sexual ability (Bolt, 2013, p. 39).

English professor Margaret Rose Torrell agrees with Bolt, recalling a pre-disability description of Rochester as "hard and tough as an India-rubber ball" which contrasts with the vulnerable flesh of Rochester's disabled body (Brontë as cited in Torrell, 2013, p. 71). Clarifying why such a change would prompt devastation, Susan Bordo explains the unrealistic view of male sexuality generated by the penis' mythical counterpart: the phallus. Bordo argues that the phallus is "a creature of the cultural imagination, not biology" (Bordo, 1999, p. 104). Unlike the anatomical construct of the penis, it is artificial, eternally hard, erect, and powerful. As a result, the phallus "haunts the penis," ensuring that the fallible sex organs of cisgender men will never "measure up [to its] heroic unflinching constancy" (p. 86). Bordo thus exposes the precarity of manhood, tied to an impossible ideal. This juxtaposition between the hard, hyper-masculine phallus and the fallible, fleshy penis is eerily applicable to Rochester's transformation from "hard and tough" to soft and vulnerable.

Yet, counterintuitively, Rochester's transformation is a source of *relief* to Jane, whose reaction to Rochester is equally telling as to how disability was then understood. After describing a sullen, brooding Rochester, Jane inquires, "And, reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity?" only to reject this notion and claim that, instead, "A soft hope blent with my sorrow that soon I should dare to drop a kiss on that brow of rock" (Brontë, 1847, p. 384). Interestingly, despite my previous claim regarding Rochester's hardness giving way, Jane describes his brow as rock-like. Although Rochester believes his manhood has been eroded, Jane still views him as masculine and phallic. This may seem to challenge a view of disability as inherently desexing its subject. However, this reading is undermined by the source of Jane's "hope." Jane's optimism is contextualized by her former sense of subservience to Rochester; uncomfortable with his domineering ways in addition to his literal and social capital, Jane worries throughout the novel that she will be overshadowed by her potential partner. Thus, the discovery that he has become a blind amputee is a source of excitement to Jane. She believes that his resulting "reduced" state will facilitate an egalitarian relationship.

This perspective is not novel. Countless scholars have endorsed the "longstanding critical argument that Brontë uses disability symbolically as the only way to level Rochester's power and enable her vision of egalitarian marriage" (Stoddard Holmes, 2013, p. 154). Helene Moglen, for instance, "sees [Rochester's] injuries as the necessary complement to Jane's independence, 'the terrible condition of a relationship of equality'" (Moglen as cited in Stoddard Holmes, p. 162). Meanwhile, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of the foundational work The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, opine that "'now, being equals, he and Jane can afford to depend upon each other with no fear of one exploiting the other'" (Gilbert and Gubar as cited in Stoddard Holmes, p.162). It is perceived equality, then, that enables the pair to unite. Therefore, when Rochester questions Jane's desire to marry him despite his "deficiencies," Jane replies, "'I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence'" (Brontë, 1847, p. 396). Moglen, Gilbert and Gubar's readings of the couple as equalized are thus reinforced.

However, this interpretation requires additional critical commentary. Martha Stoddard Holmes provides just that, noting, "What is problematic about this [interpretation] is that it reads disability as purely symbolic" (Stoddard Holmes, 2013, p.162). Indeed, disability seems a mere plot device in *Eyre*, a tossed-in ingredient to level the pair's social playing field. As a woman in a patriarchal society, Jane's financial dependence and social subservience bar her from an equitable union. Yet Jane suddenly receives a family fortune, and Rochester is "punished" for his controlling nature with disability, allowing this inequity to disappear. As Chih-Ping Chen claims, "Gender inequality and social marginality faced by a woman are 'corrected' only by the reversal of the gendered roles of the host and the exhibit" (Chen as cited in Torrell, 2013). In thus assuming that injury diminishes Rochester's

social standing, *Jane Eyre* reflects a then-common view of disability as a symbol of weakness that places a man on the same level as a socially inferior woman, even as it champions a radically egalitarian marriage for the time period.

By contrast, English and disability studies professor Essaka Joshua interprets *Eyre* as linking disability to *strength*. She affirms that the novel's repositioning of Biblical allusions posits disability as not only acceptable, but *sacred*, a pathway to religious salvation. The novel achieves this by "associating passages that admit of a redemptionist reading with characters who show their spiritual worth" (Joshua, 2013, p. 127). Joshua asserts that "When the sighted Edward is on what the novel deems to be the wrong religious path, he is associated with the foibles of the sighted Samson; when he has experienced his religious conversion, he is the blind man who spiritually sees" (p. 127). For this reason, Joshua believes that readings of Edward's injuries as punishment for his past behaviors are unsupported. Instead, she considers these wounds to be manifestations of his moral reform. Certainly, there are legitimate critiques to be made of this reading, as Christianity and disability have had a tenuous relationship. That said, the radical re-envisioning of *Eyre* as *celebrating* physical difference is impactful, particularly in how — assuming this was, in fact, her intention — Brontë went so far as to subvert Biblical narratives to paint a more favorable portrait of disability.

Likewise, it is worth acknowledging that a disabled character who is loved no less — and in fact, *more* because of his disability — is a rare occurrence in nineteenth-century literature. Historian Ernest Freeberg explains that although, "by one estimate, there were as many as eight thousand blind people in America in the 1830s [...] the blind were invisible, hidden from view. Wealthier families usually kept their blind relatives confined to back rooms and kitchen corners" (2002, p. 121). This changed in the early 1830s with the advent of schools for the blind and demonstrations of blind individuals' capacity for knowledge and rewarding lives. This capacity is illustrated in *Jane Eyre*; at the end of the novel, Rochester marries Jane and fathers a child. That a depiction of a fulfilled and happy blind man was published a mere decade after views of this group began to change is significant. Rochester powerfully partakes in normative milestones despite an injury that, in years past, would have barred him from such a future.

However, by reaching toward normativity, *Eyre* further complicates its portrait of impairment. Strikingly, Rochester's blindness disappears after his marriage to Jane. He "eventually recover[s] the sight of [...] one eye," enabling him to "find his way without being led by the hand" (Brontë, 1847, p. 402). Despite Joshua's claims, it seems as though Rochester has been "rewarded" with sight and independence in recognition of his egalitarian relationship. In addition to perpetuating notions of nondisabled superiority, this also invokes a common trope: the healing power of heterosexuality. Robert McRuer, the father of crip theory (a field that draws from disability studies and queer theory), unpacks this cliche, claiming that, for many characters, "able-bodied status is achieved in direct proportion to [...] increasing awareness of, and need for, (heterosexual) romance" (2006, p. 24). Disability is often symbolically linked to immorality, and, indeed, this is the case for the formerly domineering Rochester, "punished" with impairment. Yet submitting to heterosexual desire purifies the disabled soul. By uniting with Jane and ceding his power, Rochester has been an exemplary enough heterosexual to be "rewarded" with physical "normalcy." Thus, Rochester's trajectory is multi-faceted: It easily lends itself to a paranoid reading, showcasing a hierarchy of normalcy that disadvantages deviant forms, disabled and heterosexually-unfulfilled alike. Simultaneously, it reaches toward the reparative, engineering then-radical gender equality and a joy-filled future for a disabled individual. Both readings are essential to extracting the fullness and complexity that *Jane Eyre* has to offer.

Olive: From Pity to Agency

Olive Rothesay is the rare disabled *protagonist* — not sidekick or background character — who, unlike Rochester, is *congenitally* impaired. Also a bildungsroman, Olive's tale traces the heroine's development from birth into young adulthood. Though her disability is posited as pitiable, it is never a barrier to a life of joy and meaning for this three-dimensional character.

Soon after she enters the world, Olive's doctor discovers a slight curvature of her tiny spine and pronounces her deformed. Elspie, the nurse who had previously rocked Olive tenderly, suddenly "wore a look almost of repugnance as she regarded the unconscious child, and then that very unconsciousness seemed to awaken her womanly compassion" (Mulock Craik, 1905, p. 10). Elspie's disgust articulates her unsavory feelings toward disability. It is only Olive's infancy and perceived innocence that stirs the nurse's empathy. After all, as Joseph Shapiro notes, "Disability was barely tolerable — and only to be pitied — when it struck cute and innocent children. It was unmentionable in adults" (Shapiro, 1993, p. 15). Compassion consuming her, Elspie whispers, "'Puir hapless wean [...] Lack of kinsman's love, and lack o' siller, and lack o' beauty. God forgive me—but why did He send ye into the awful' warld a a'?'" (Mulock Craik, 1905, p. 10). Simultaneously, Elspie invokes pity discourse by deeming Olive "puir" (poor), desexes her, conflates disability with ugliness, and questions the child's right to exist. This disparaging perspective is not unique to the nurse. The tale's omniscient narrator says of Elspie's inquiry to God, "It was a question, the nature of which has perplexed theologians, philosophers, and metaphysicians in every age, and will perplex them all to the end of time" (pp. 10-11). That supposedly wise individuals across disciplines ponder disabled individuals' reason for existence conveys the ubiquity of this attitude, one that casts disabled bodies as so inferior that their right to life is questioned. Thus, from her very first day of life, Olive is subjected to discrimination and pity.

Olive continues to be the subject of pity discourse throughout much of the story, a perspective perpetuated by its narrator. Lamentations of Olive's bad fortune become a textual refrain, engaging the reader's emotions each time she is discriminated against because of her appearance. This becomes challenging to unpack for modern-day audiences. Certainly, being disregarded and disrespected is cause for empathy. Yet the narration seems to beg a sadness that Olive is disabled in the first place, reflecting societal stigmatization of physical impairment.

However, the *impact* of such ableism is also showcased and critiqued. For the first several years of her life, Olive is raised exclusively by Elspie; her mother is too disgusted by her disabled progeny and her father is abroad and unaware of her disfigurement. When Captain Rothesay returns home, he finally learns that his daughter is hunchbacked and turns away from her, horrified. Although a mere child, "Olive saw the gesture. Young as she was, it went deep into her child's soul" (p. 33). Again, Olive's youth is

referenced. However, instead of regarding her as pitiable and innocent due to her age, the narration grants her agency and wisdom, clarifying that she can and *does* understand adults' ableist gestures. Short syntax conveys the simplicity of this revelation, highlighting how quickly and pointedly discrimination wounds. This demonstration may not be rooted in disability activism, but it is progressive for its time in how it implores readers to consider the scarring effects of ableism.

The text similarly addresses the source of adults' discomfort with Olive's body. Elspie's assumption that Olive will be unmarriageable due to her deformity is shared by the child's parents, generating disdain-turned-pity. When young Olive, unconcerned with romance, claims that she will never marry, her father misinterprets; he believes her ineligibility stems from her looks as opposed to youthful disinterest. "'Of course, she will never marry,'" he murmurs. "'Poor child! — poor child!'" (p. 71). The strength of Captain Rothesay's conviction speaks to the automacy of assumptions that disabled individuals lack romantic prospects. This leads to more pity discourse ("Poor child!") and showcases a heteronormative perspective that deems any future without straight romance inferior.

Another common belief that *Olive* depicts — and challenges — is a view of disability as an objective state. Though Olive can see that her body is different from those of her peers, she is comfortable with her appearance and confident in her worth. That is, until, as a preteen, her "friend" Sara explains that her hunch makes her unsuitable for marriage:

> 'I assure you, dear,' began Sara, hesitatingly, 'it does not signify to me, or to any of those who care for you; you are such a gentle little creature, we forget it all in time. But perhaps with strangers, especially with men, who think so much about beauty, this defect—'
>
> She paused, laying her arm round Olive's shoulders — even affectionately, as if she herself were much moved. But Olive, with a cheek that whitened, and a lip that quivered more and more, looked resolutely at her own shape imaged in the glass.
>
> 'I see as I never saw before — so little I thought of myself. Yes, it is quite true — quite true.'
>
> She spoke beneath her breath, and her eyes seemed fascinated into a hard, cold gaze. Sara became almost frightened.
>
> 'Do not look so, my dear girl; I did not say that it was a positive deformity.'
>
> Olive faintly shuddered: 'Ah, that is the word! I understand it all now.' (pp. 89-90)

Olive's surprise that her appearance would be stigmatized highlights the social construction of disability. Given her body's deviation from the "norm," an arbitrary determination of her physical failure is broadly adopted. The novel thus points to ways in which society rather than impairment itself constructs circumstances that disadvantage disabled bodies.

In spite of Sara's suggestion, Olive does *not* end up alone. Instead, she is the romantic interest of not one but two eligible men (both nondisabled): her childhood playmate Lyle Derwent and clergyman Harold Gwynne. This is not without room for critique: Robert McRuer's contention that with heterosexual courtship comes able-bodied status (as for *Jane Eyre's* Mr. Rochester) is again invoked. As Olive matures, the narrator suggests that "nature had bestowed on her this great beauty, in order to veil that defect which, though made far less apparent by her maturer growth, and a certain art in dress, could never be entirely removed" (p. 177). The lessening visibility of Olive's deformity and her otherwise near-total adherence to feminine beauty standards is framed as necessary to the protagonist's ability to secure men's affection.

Still, Olive is fleshed out beyond her appearance. Unlike many other disabled characters of the time (Tiny Tim, from Dickens' A Christmas Carol, for instance), her personality is not conflated with her disability. She is intelligent, patient, wise beyond her years, and, in an inversion of gender roles, the family's main breadwinner after the passing of her father. She finds joy in art, her Christian faith, and socializing with loved ones. In an ironic twist of fate, she also becomes a caregiver to her mother who loses sight as she ages. With this move in particular, the text seems to cheekily, yet earnestly remind the reader that anyone may become disabled at any time. While this argument may be problematic from a modern perspective — after all, we should treat others with respect regardless of their proximity to our own identities — it was likely effective at the time in advocating acknowledgement of disabled lives.

Let us now return to Olive's suitors: When Lyle admits that he has pined for Olive for years, he exclaims, "'All the poetry I ever wrote was about you — your golden hair, and your sweet eyes. You seemed to me then, and you seem now, the most beautiful creature in the whole world'" (p. 365). Although Lyle's evaluation of Olive is still based on standards of feminine beauty — which, again, Olive more-or-less meets apart from her disability — that he sees her as beautiful deviates from the then-dominant cultural script. When Olive, startled, alludes to her hunch, Lyle hastily replies, "'I know what you would say [...] But I think nothing of it — nothing!'" (p. 366). The young man's reaction is complicated. On the one hand, it removes Olive's body from her fitness as a romantic partner. On the other hand, it functions as the able-bodied equivalent of a white person's claim to "not see color," dismissing the existence of something that has decidedly shaped Olive's oppression. Similarly, it implies that Lyle loves Olive *despite*, not *including* her disability.

This is not the case for Harold Gwynne, the man that Olive ultimately weds. In a comparable scene, Olive again indicates shock that Gwynne returns her affection and wonders why he cares for her despite her looks. To this, Gwynne responds, "'Olive, if you love me, and believe that I love you, never grieve me by such thoughts again. To me you are all beautiful — in heart and mind, in form and soul'" (p. 417). Harold's reference to "all" Olive's beauty achieves two ends: It does not exclusively locate her beauty in her looks, also referencing her kindness and intelligence; and it includes her body and so-called deformity in its assessment of Olive's virtues. The reader cannot help but feel joy for Olive who has found a partner who supports and loves the whole of her. The text thus offers an alternative future in which disability can be celebrated rather than reviled or ignored.

Once married, Olive and Harold choose to adopt rather than have a biological child. Literature professor Martha Stoddard Holmes speaks to Olive's decision not to reproduce although this was considered a wifely duty at the time of the novel's setting and publication: "The fact that Olive does not have a biological child, combined with some suggestions of family hereditary 'taint' as a cause for her disability, might imply that this outcome is Mulock