UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Imperfectly Understood: Intellectual Disability and the Nineteenth Century

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2wv3q42x

ISBN

9798288854088

Author

Prindle, Joshua John

Publication Date

2025-05-28

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Imperfectly Understood:
Intellectual Disability and the Nineteenth Century

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Joshua J. Prindle

June 2025

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Susan Zieger, Chairperson
Dr. Padma Rangarajan
Dr. Fuson Wang

Copyright by
Josh J. Prindle
2025

Acknowledgments

This project is the result of living around intellectual disability all my life. But, more importantly, this project is the result of living with and caring about the people that disability affects. This project, then, is a realization of the collective effort to care for those with special needs, a realization of just how collective that effort is.

I would like to thank the following people:

Dr. Susan Zieger for her persistent guidance and endless patience. Dr. Padma Rangarajan for her empathy and academic enthusiasm during intervals imbued with angst and apathy. Dr. Fuson Wang for his theoretical expertise and perspective. Dr. Emma Stapely. Dr. Carla Mazzio. Dr. Ray Papica. Dr. Sean Grass. Dr. Jeremy Withers. And special thanks to Perla Fabelo.

Dr. Grant Palmer, Dr. Kristoffer Ekroll, Dr. Amanda Riggle, Dr. Ian Galbraith, Dr. David Siglos, Dr. Nick Clark, Adrita Mukherjee, Jose Arellano, Dr. Kameron Sanzo, Dr. Miranda Steege, Aran Park, Jaye Johnson, Michael Pfirrman-Pugh, Drew Trinidad, Alejandra Marquez, Danny Bonitz, Jonathan Donabo, Amy Duong, Sylvie Hansen, Rhiannon Rogers. Jovana Isevski, Jenny Wong, and Luis Palacios. Ellen Rhodes and Ariel Jetty. Jeremy Lockwood. Mirian Fajardo, for her effervescent friendship and encouragement.

The Merleau-Ponty Reading Group and Dickens Universe.

All the respite workers who have provided care to Zach throughout his life. Special thanks to Dave Waters for proving to me, at a young age, that my family was not alone in this challenge.

Mom and Dad, two of my most adamant supporters, who never let me believe I was not capable enough. My grandmother and grandfather, whose remembrance encouraged this project's completion. My sister, Cassie, whose primogenital inheritance is also our family's greatest

burden. This project is as much a result of your experience, love, and labor as it is mine. I hope you know I will do everything I can to always be there for you and for Zach. Thank you for being the best big sister I could ask for.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank my brother, Zach. You have made life far more interesting than it otherwise might have been. You have made me sad and you have made me angry. You have made me laugh and cry. There have been times when your actions made me wish you did not exist. But I love you. Through all this, you have helped make me who I am. You have allowed me to be a better person. Thank you for just being you.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Imperfectly Understood: Intellectual Disability and the Nineteenth Century

by

Joshua J. Prindle

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2025
Dr. Susan Zieger, Chairperson

This dissertation examines the figure of the 'idiot' in primarily British literature as it is constructed through the Victorian period. Constructions of 'idiocy' helped to manufacture modern conceptualizations of normalcy, as views of 'perfectibility' and 'fitness' established a dialectical contrast to individuals categorized as deviant. The increasing medicalization of intelligence is reflected in the nascence and development of institutions like the Earlswood Asylum and Sandlebridge school, designed specifically to manage individuals considered intellectually unfit. Such institutionalization, when brought into conversation with industrialization and a nascent welfare state, increased stigma against people with intellectual disabilities, who were perceived as parasitical in nature. This project finds purchase in the movements and ideologies that emerge from Darwinism: Social Darwinism, Degeneration Theory, and Eugenics. By prioritizing the interval both prior to and following the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), this project traces the increasing dehumanization of individuals with intellectual impairments.

Each chapter highlights a different interdisciplinary intersection of intellectual disability in the 19th century. This is a reflection of the various ways in which intellectual disability can influence a person's life. This project is inherently interdisciplinary in nature. This interdisciplinarity is ingrained in disability discourse—a fundamental aspect of DS is that *anyone* can become disabled. Furthermore, as became apparent throughout the writing of this project,

disability can affect anyone, even if you are not directly affected. Each of these chapters, for instance, engages in some way with the concept of Care. This may be the failure of familial care, as in chapters 1 and 3; or perhaps it is the failure of communal care, as in chapters 2 and 4. Each chapter also locates an intersection of disability and other modes of lived experience. The first chapter examines class, populism, and 'idiocy' as viewed through the Dickensian riot. Two chapters deal with gender: chapter 2 looks at the girl who is afflicted with an intellectual impairment while chapter 3 looks at the mother of intellectually disabled children. This project, at times, is less interested in the concept of intellectual disability than it is interested in the relationships that intellectual disability produces. Chapter 4 tracks intellectual disability in the U.S. post-civil war, wherein constructs of intelligence and race result in the erasure of certain individuals deemed mentally (but also racially) unfit to exist today. These chapters work together to create a collage of intellectual disability in the mid-to-late 19th century that strangely resembles certain contemporaneous views of intelligence.

This project changed drastically following the 2024 election and the surge of far-right Nationalist ideology. If my project is in any way politically radical, it is only so as a response to the frequently illegal and usually immoral policies of the Trump agenda. This project became, then, a response to the Trump administration's biopolitical eugenic ableism. This is an administration that, in its dissolution of the education department, moved its Special Needs Education programs to the U.S. Health Department of Health and Human Services (helmed by the anti-vaccination conspiracy theorist, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.). This move, I suggest, delineates the current administration's views of the impairment vs disability debate in stark fashion. The rhetorical move suggests that 'impairment' matters far more than disability. This aligns with statements from both the DHS secretary and from Trump himself—both of whom see impairment as a loss of ability or potential. For RFK this loss is in personhood—the individual with ID,

unable to even perform the basics of hygiene, is less of a person. Trump's views have often been expressed in accordance with monetary loss—such as the air traffic controller who ostensibly DEI'd their way into a job for which they were mentally unfit. The current administration's views of fitness are largely predicated on archaic constructs of personhood that delineate personhood and intelligence according to perceptions of race, gender, and class. This project, which traces the historical continuity of stigma against people with Intellectual Disabilities, thereby became a response to the ableist and racist rhetoric spread by an increasingly authoritarian administration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction **1**

Impairment, Disability, and Neurodiversity 9

Idiocy, Imbecility, and Feeble-Mindedness 16

Chapter 1: "A Revolution of Common Sense": Idiocy, Populism, and Riot in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* **25**

The Populist Riot and the Irrational Revolution 28

The Politics of Dickens' Riot 34

Riot, Through the Dialectical Keyhole 38

Cripping Time, Executing Barnaby 49

Conclusion 56

Chapter 2: Feeble-Minded Women, Sexuality, and the Politics of Care **59**

FM Women, Sex, and Ignorant Morality 66

Care, Community, and FM Vulnerability 81

Conclusion 94

Chapter 3: Joseph Conrad's "The Idiots", Maternity, and the Intellectual Uncanny **99**

ReFraming Uncanniness and Intellectual Disability 101

Maternity and the Reproduction of [Un]Health 116

[Self]Surveillance and the Family 128

Conclusion 138

Chapter 4: Race and Intelligence in Stephen Crane's "The Monster" **144**

Intelligence and 'Whiteness' 151

Henry, Memory, and Imagined Racial Trauma 166

Conclusion 176

Conclusion **179**

Bibliography **188**

Introduction

This project attempts a historicization of the concept of intellectual disability (ID) as it transforms throughout the nineteenth century. I have boldly titled this project *Imperfectly Understood.* I want to emphasize that this title does not suggest that I have some secret insight into the minds of people with intellectual disabilities. Rather, my title refers to the social nature of this condition: intellectual disability, by its nature, is socially alienating. It cannot be perfectly understood. Of course, perhaps this is setting up a strawman argument. Which mind can be 'perfectly' understood, really? Yet, history has repeatedly shown the ramifications of these misunderstandings, these miscommunications. So, this title is a reference to historical attempts at understanding mental difference; the nature of these attempts showcases the troubling effects of scientific inquiry toward forms of perceived deficiency.

This project is the outcome of living with an older brother diagnosed with Tuberous-Sclerosis (TSC). Zach, who is eight years older than me and six years older than our sister Cassie, was diagnosed several months after he was born. TSC is an autosomal dominant disorder, meaning that it results from an abnormality in the non-sexual chromosomes and is genetically inherited. It occurs in one in 6,800 births and is believed to affect approximately one million people across the globe.[1] Symptoms of TSC are varied but include infantile spasms, intractable epilepsy,[2] cognitive disabilities, and autism. TSC also causes hamartomas, usually non-cancerous tumor-like growths, that manifest on various organs including the skin, brain, heart, and lungs.

---

[1] Underwood, Lisa. "Advances in Tuberous Sclerosis Complex (TSC) Research". *Tuberous Sclerosis Complex: A Rare Genetic Condition Associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder.* Edited by Jane McCarthy, Lisa Underwood, and Charlotte Tye, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2016, p. 59.

[2] Intractable epilepsy, while having no uniform definition, can be defined as a seizure disorder in which patients "do not achieve complete control of (disabling) seizures", often signaled by a "failure of two or three medications and a minimum number of disabling seizures…over a certain time period" Schuele, Stephan U. and Hans O Lüders. "Intractable Epilepsy: Management and Therapeutic Alternatives." *Lancet Neural*, Vol. 7, 2008, p. 515.

Additionally, TSC is also often dermatologically manifested through non-cancerous facial angiofibroma, hard red bumps that often appear on or around the nose. The rhinophyma is more notable, in Zach's case. This is a severe form of rosacea that appears exclusively on the nose; it is composed of bulbous growths.[3] Though diagnosed at four months old, Zach's dermatological features manifested themselves when he was approximately eight and have become more pronounced as he has aged. At 41, his nose is completely covered in hard, red growths. These grow around and on top of each other, causing Zach's nose to appear large and misshapen; the manifestations are so pronounced that they often break the skin and bleed. Apart from the discomfort that this condition must cause, the angiofibroma and rhinophyma have always been a prominent visual component of Zach's difference. These visual cues are not especially important, in the grander scheme of Zach's condition. Though his dermatological condition may be painful, it was never a source of medical concern. This is not to say that my parents did not seek out treatments for angiofibroma, but the rarity of Zach's condition made finding information, pre-internet, challenging. Most doctors were unfamiliar with the condition, and specialists were few and far between. At one point, my mom discovered a possible treatment. Rapamyacin is a topical ointment which has since been proven to reduce the size and inflammation of TSC facial manifestations. However, by the time the drug had passed clinical trials, Zach was too old and his symptoms too pronounced. But the visual aspect is not limited to his skin. Zach also has strabismus, a disorder in which the eyes do not align. It is never clear what exactly Zach is focusing on, and even when he sees me, I do not get the sense that he is looking at me. When I was younger, I was always aware of the stares that Zach would garner, especially from children.

[3] Yigider, Ayse Pelin, Fatma Tulin Kayhan, Ozgur Yigit, Ayse Kavak, and Cemal Cingi. "Skin Diseases of the Nose" *American Journal fo Rhinology &* Allergy, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2016, p. E84.

Zach's condition is rare, and thus this curiosity is natural. Still, I was aware of my family's difference.

Of greater concern are Zach's seizures. Over 90% of individuals with TSC experience seizures; infantile spasms are especially common and often an initial diagnostic symptom.[4] Complex-partial seizures involve a "diminished level of consciousness during (ictal) and after (postictal) the event", while simple-partial seizures do not impede consciousness; ongoing research has yet to determine why some seizures impede consciousness while others do not.[5] Zach's seizures typically strike at night after he has fallen asleep. As kids, Zach and I bunked in the same room, so I was often privy to his nightly troubles. Many nights I awoke to Zach's strained groan. The guttural tone would, without fail, awaken me with a shot of adrenaline and I would shout for help. My parents would sleepily come into the room and sit next to him, ensuring he could not fall or injure himself. There is nothing else you can do for him, apart from ensuring his airway stays open, that he does not bury his head in a pillow. After two minutes or so, Zach's body would gradually relax. His breathing would return to normal. Then the nightly work would begin. Each time Zach experienced a seizure, several times weekly, he would lose control of his bladder. My dad would take him into the bathroom and give him a quick shower, while my mom changed the bed sheets. Then, and only then, could everyone return to sleep. I do not include this description for any reason except to explain the intricacies of living with this aspect of tuberous sclerosis. The issues of care extend far beyond what most can imagine and will last as long as Zach lives. Various medications have helped with the frequency and severity of the seizures, but there is no solution to Zach's condition. His medications for 2024 cost $28 thousand, paid in full

[4] Islam, Monica P, and E. Steve Roach. "Tuberous Sclerosis Complex". *Handbook of Clinical Neurology,* Vol. 132, 2015, p. 101.
[5] Englot, Dario J. and Hal Blumenfeld. "Consciousness and Epilepsy: why are complex-partial seizures complex?" *Progress in Brain Research*, Vol. 177, 2010, p. 150.

through Medicaid (~$20 thousand) and Social Security (~$8 thousand). Zach's life is not cheap, but various welfare programs have allowed us to increase his quality of life as much as possible. Zach is now on Epidiolex, a cannabidiol medication used for its anticonvulsant properties. Such a treatment would have been unthinkable twenty years ago, if only for political reasons. As a mostly conservative state, Iowa has been slow to recognize the value and relief that medical marijuana can provide. This medication has reduced the frequency of seizures to about once a week; the severity has also gone down significantly. But Zach's seizures are still a source of concern, especially considering how much he has grown. At about 170 pounds, Zach is no longer that kid in the bottom bunk and it has become more difficult to keep him safe while he is having an episode. My parents are now in their seventies and often struggle to stabilize Zach's dead weight while he seizes. The time has come for Zach to move to a new home, but this breeds its own set of problems. Can we trust someone else with our family members' wellbeing? How well will Zach be able to assimilate to such a drastic change, this late in his life?

Zach's place on the autism spectrum and his limited intellectual capacity has also influenced our family dynamic. Some of these behaviors are more shocking. He does not function well in crowds and, when he was younger, would often throw himself on the ground when overwhelmed. But much of Zach's behavior is innocuous. He exhibits various repetitive behaviors common in ASD, such as specific hand gestures. His most frequent hand gesture involves a snapping motion with his thumb and index, middle, and ring fingers. Until a few years ago, Zach's main hobby, and only activity resembling exercise, was repeatedly falling into a large rubbery exercise ball. Other habits, most will admit, are unusual. As a kid, Zach had a habit of eating toilet paper.[6] And it is not as though Zach has no sense of taste. Skittles were, and are, his

[6] Pica is defined in the DSM-IV as "the persistent eating of non-nutritive substances"; while a relatively common behavior in young children, the practice is also commonly associated with intellectual disability, as well as people with conditions like dementia. Qtd. in Ali, Zainab. "Pica in People with Intellectual

favorite food group. His go-to drink is Diet Coke, but he requires two glasses so he can recurrently pour the liquid from one glass to the other. If he is not given the correct number of glasses, Zach will find them. This is also partly why our house is outfitted with locks on not only external doors, but the fridge and cabinets as well. The snacks must be kept safe from Zach's clutches. At other times, Zach's behavior is amusing. He has a good sense of comedic timing, and has many times punctured the pregnant silence of a dark movie theater with a hearty laugh. Audiences have not always appreciated his avant-garde performances as much as we have. His table manners are equal parts absorbing and nauseating. Sometimes it is easier to find the humor than others.

Zach's day-to-day life is one of constant care. I admit that I have more and more difficulty finding Zach's behavior humorous; it is difficult when I see my retired father still waking at 7 am to get Zach ready for the day. Zach has no conception of hygiene, though we have tried to teach him hygienic habits. He cannot shower by himself. My dad brushes his teeth daily. Despite these efforts, I worry about Zach's dental health, considering his sugary and acidic diet. He regularly grinds his teeth, a habit he refuses to quit; he does not realize that this will make eating, one of his favorite pastimes, more challenging. He is getting better at it, but Zach occasionally forgets to flush the toilet and wash his hands after use. The lasting nature of Zach's condition cannot really be conveyed in full here. My parents still care for a child who will never grow up. While we have searched for several years for a permanent housing situation, this task has proved arduous. Institutions designed to provide long-term care to people with intellectual disabilities are few and far between, and this eschews common narratives of abuse and neglect so historically (and contemporaneously) embedded in institutional discourse. Growing up with Zach

---

Disability: A literature Review of Aetiology, Epidemiology, and Complications". *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability,* Vol. 26, No. 3, 2001, 205-206.

has given me insight into the ways that people with mental differences are treated, both publicly and institutionally. This project is the culmination of my experiences growing up under the shadow of intellectual disability. It is the result of knowing since we were kids that my sister and I held a responsibility toward Zach that bound us altogether, a responsibility that informs this project's engagement with the social, political, and philosophical implications of ID.

Through the lens of disability theory, this project examines intellectual disability, a conglomeration of genetic or acquired conditions that reflect a difference in mental ability. My project is, first-and-foremost, concerned with conditions in which a person's ability to function on a day-to-day basis is impacted because of their cognitive function. However, this project also implores the reader to consider the fluidity of 'intelligence' as a concept, and to reconsider how 'intellectual disability' factors into broader discussions of cognitive ability and everyday functioning. Questions of normativity, then, are at the heart of this dissertation. Who or what can be considered 'normal' constitutes who or what moves beyond this norm. This project, in prioritizing a discussion of intellectual disability is deeply invested in broader constructions of intelligence as the 'norm'. My project relies on the writings of Lennard Davis, who argues that a desire for the norm is a desire for perfection. Davis's argument follows that the 'normal' body is inherently imperfect. Some people are born with flaws. Others acquire then through accidents or through age. The body and mind can be afflicted at any time but *will* be afflicted at some point. The nature of the bodymind is such that everyone will eventually become disabled, at one point or another, even if this is just due to the process of aging. Margaret Price introduced the term 'bodymind', which will appear throughout the rest of this project. Bodymind refers to the interrelationship between the body and mind in producing our ideas of impairment and disability. The mental qualities to which this project refers are abstract but also concretized because of their existence within not only the mind, but also the brain, of an individual. This project, then, finds

its foothold in the ideas of 'intelligence' and 'normalcy' as they are viewed in both abstract and concrete terms. I argue that notions of intelligence are highly fraught, and are largely predicated on social and economic cues, especially as they tie into questions of class, gender, and race. The ways in which intelligence has been constructed along these lines can be traced back, at least in part, to the nineteenth century.

Imperfectly Understood focuses on the nineteenth century as the point of origin for modern paradigms of intelligence. This is for a variety of reasons but largely reflects the 19C as a period of modernization, with all the benefits and detriments such a transition entails. Industrialization played a fundamental role in deciding which bodyminds were fit for labor and which were not. The increased proximity of bodyminds allowed for a larger sense of what could be considered the norm; industrialization thereby enabled the social category of disability. This social category resulted in the medicalization and marginalization of people with intellectual disabilities. The social quality emerged from an overlapping of scientific theory with social theory: Darwin's theory of evolutionary biology was co-opted by eugenicists into Social Darwinism. Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin, is most famous for coining the term Eugenics, implementing his cousin's theories into a theory for human improvement. From here, scientific theories become more and more concerned with the degradation of the human race through degeneration. These concerns existed prior to Darwin, but Darwinism provided a secular answer to socioeconomic and racial inequalities which had previously been explained away through religious logic. Now, Social Darwinists could argue that immoral behaviors like sexual deviancy could be scientifically explained: it was a result of inferior stock. Concerns of human degeneration, as espoused by Max Nordau and other eugenicists at the time, were *the* fear of the nation, moving forward. The nineteenth century, then, became increasingly concerned with the health of the Nation, so precipitously positioned as the century came to a close. Idiocy, imbecility,

and Feeble-mindedness became all the more threatening throughout the century as scientific and cultural discourse suggested their seepage further into the populace. This was a problem not just for the present; this was the problem of the future.

This project also looks to the nineteenth century as the origin of the modern welfare state. It examines the gradations of intelligence that limit a person's ability to function in modern society. Such conditions can limit possibilities for labor and some require frequent, if not constant, care. The interval in which this project focuses is predicated on a move toward institutionalization as a solution to pauperism, one of the most troubling social symptoms of ID. Andrew Scull, in *The Most Solitary of Afflictions,* argues that Britain saw a massive institutional shift between the mid-1800s and the mid-1900s. He suggests that, prior to this period, "impoverished madmen were assimilated into the much larger, amorphous class of the morally disreputable, the poor, and the impotent, a group which also included vagrants, minor criminals, and the physically handicapped" (1). There was no separation between madness, which included conditions related to intellectual disability, and the rest of the British population. Coalescing alongside the industrial mode of production, psychiatric institutionalization provided the means of segregating newly discovered deficient bodyminds. Foucault famously argues that "No medical advance, no humanitarian approach was responsible for the fact that the mad were gradually isolated, that the monotony of insanity was divided into rudimentary types. It was the depths of confinement itself that generated the phenomenon" (224). Both Scull and Foucault trace the increasing institutionalization of those considered mentally unfit to exist in the public sphere. Scull suggests that the start of the 19C, coupled with a move toward urbanization, reduced financial options for families, especially those with a "non-productive [family] member"; however, Scull also suggests that it is the move to a market economy and an increased "commercialization of existence", and not urbanization itself, that so directly increases

institutionalization during the period (26-29). Regardless of the most direct cause, the 19C saw a drastic increase in institutional care, and these forms of care shifted alongside dominant ideologies of the time. This project attempts an historical analysis of intellectual disability in the 19C, and the ways in which its iterations like 'idiocy', 'imbecility', and 'feeble-mindedness' reflected broader conceptions of intelligence. *Imperfectly Understood* thereby examines the 19C's ideas of intelligence and personhood as they are reinforced and complicated by literary representations of ID.

Impairment, Disability, and Neurodiversity

To attempt a historical conceptualization of intellectual disability is also to write on the larger idea of 'intelligence'. To start, I suggest that intelligence is about potential and perfectibility; it supposes that there is a peak level of intellectual performativity just as there is a valley. The *OED* defines intelligence as "the faculty of understanding", "a capacity to understand", and the act of "mentally apprehending something".[7] These are helpful definitions, but they are not wholly consistent. I suggest that, for this project, the second definition seems the most pertinent for a discussion of ID in the 19C. The 19C was a period obsessed with 'fitness' and 'perfectibility'; it did not suffice to be naturally gifted; one required the cultivation of talents to reach their full potential. Intelligence, in this view, functions as a reservoir, an empty space into which knowledge is spilled and stored. Dipping into this reservoir is to recall, to remember. This recalling of information becomes a performance of intelligence; to be able to recall information, and to recall information quickly, becomes the sign of a sound mind. The sounder the mind, the more accurate the information and the quicker the recollection of memory. This, of course, raises various questions around the loss of memory, as is common with age or with conditions like

[7] "Intelligence, n. 1., n. 3." *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, January 2025.

Dementia. I do not take this tangent lightly but rather point out one of the many the truths that DS repeatedly espouses: that everyone can and will become disabled at some point. We like to imagine intelligence as a static quality, but this is far from the truth. This interweaving of 'intelligence' with mnemonic conditions, like Dementia, creates a more plastic construction that stretches across age, race, class and gender. Intelligence, in some form or another, is present in every bodymind but is presented differently based on the body and mind (and race, and class, and gender) from which it presents itself. In essence, intelligence is a quantification of an individual's ability to perform as a person.

Historically, the ability to perform as a person has been encoded along certain social strata. The performance of intelligence has been viewed differently based on the person exhibiting the trait. This also broaches the question of who is capable, and who is allowed to be capable, of cultivating intelligence? The reader is surely familiar with various instances in which education for certain groups has been strictly prohibited or managed as a means of maintaining social paradigms. These questions quickly move my project toward traditionally marginalized groups whose intelligence becomes only one of the ways by which they are marked. While people with disabilities are largely acknowledged as a historically marginalized group, Douglas Baynton also calls attention to the way in which disability has been used as a signal of and an explanation for, perceived racial inferiority.[8] He points to instances in which mental or physical disability was utilized as evidence that certain groups were less evolved. This is especially prevalent in the practice of immigration and customs, like at Ellis Island in the 1920s, where immigrants were famously put through "an industrialized choreography", a "regime of vision" that manufactured

[8] Baynton, Douglas. "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History". *The Disability Studies Reader,* Fifth edition, Edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 2017, p. 18.

abnormal bodies.[9] Locations like Ellis Island did not just manufacture disability in the Other body, but also sought to recognize instances of "white impurity".[10] The goal of locations like Ellis Island was to determine who was not able-bodied or able-minded and who was a 'normate'. This helpful term comes from Rosemarie-Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) and describes the "social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings".[11] The normate is not the ablebodied person, but rather is the person who is perceived to be ablebodied (and able-minded) enough to be granted personhood. Garland-Thomson's neologism appears to be addressing Erving Goffman's *Stigma* (1963). In his seminal text, Goffman suggests that those who appear impaired or disabled are stigmatized or marked, signaling that "the person with a stigma is not quite human".[12] My project is interested in highly stigmatized conditions. The very nature of ID is such that it diminishes a person's ability to perform the tasks or activities that have become expected of 'normate' bodyminds.

This project complicates a simplistic division of intelligence that partly results from the practice of institutionalization. The presumption I make here is that intellectual disability performs a decisive bifurcation of intelligence, splitting those who have intelligence and those who are intellectually disabled into two camps. Those who belong in this second camp are frequently stigmatized, ostracized, or institutionalized—thereby reducing ID's visibility in the public eye. Because ID is less visible, the public is less aware of the breadth of intellectual experiences that permeate human existence. The *OED* defines intellectual disability as "any impairment of intellectual or learning ability" or as "any neurodevelopmental condition affecting

---

[9] Dolmage, Jay. "Disabled Upon Arrivalp. The Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island". *The Disability Studies Reader,* Fifth Edition, Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017, p. 45.
[10] Stubblefield, Anne. "Beyond the Pale: Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization". *Hypatia*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 162-181.
[11] Thomson, Rosemarie-Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies.* Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 8.
[12] Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* Simon & Schuster, 1963, p. 5.

intellectual processes, educational attainment, and the acquisition of skills needed for independent living and social functioning".[13] This is a broad concept, not suggestive of any specific representation or mode of being. While ID *can* limit one's ability to live independently, this is not always the case and many people with mild ID can function on their own or with help. However, institutionalization has been the most common mode of dealing or treating ID and this project is centered on an interval of increased institutionalization. The construction of certain institutions in the 19C, such as the Earlswood Asylum and Sandlebridge Boarding School emphasized the method of their time, reflecting the move from perfectibility and habilitation to isolation and eventually sterilization. As the century progressed, the walls of institutions came to represent the imaginary separation between the sane and the insane. Social Darwinism came to see forms of mental disability, especially ID, as the threat within—which necessitated a social response of incarceration. The extent to which ID and learning disorders overlap with incarceration, especially in the U.S., reveals the startling extent to which ID continues to be policed.[14]

Social responses to ID generally suggest that most people are uncomfortable discussing it openly; I argue that this is partly due to the language that surrounds the topic. In fact, a quick etymological search suggests that most terms ooze with pejorativity. The history of ID is one of derogation. Attempts at correcting this language have resulted in less derogatory terms, but this does not mean that the etymology of intellectual disability has been wiped clean (nor should it be). In fact, the historical terms directly related to my topic, such as idiocy or imbecility, exist today though they are relatively distanced from their historical significance. Referring to something as 'idiotic' does not suggest the speaker's allusion to the historical condition, itself

[13] "Intellectual Disability." *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, January 2025.
[14] For more on incarceration and disability, see Russell, Marta and Jean Stewart. "Disablement, Prison, and Historical Segregation". *Capitalism & Disability*, Edited by Keith Rosenthal, Haymarket Books, 2019, pp. 86-96.

wrapped up in so much meaning. Yet, growing up in the nineties, I will admit that I bristled whenever someone or something was called 'retarded', given my personal experience with the condition to which this term referred. It is worth pointing out that 'Retard' appears to be making a comeback, at least on social media. A study by Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton at Montclair University showed that, following an X (formerly known as Twitter) post by Elon Musk, use of 'retard' increased on the platform threefold. An X user suggested that Musk was becoming a major disseminator of misinformation and thereby disrupting political processes, to which Musk poignantly responded, "F u retard".[15] Musk's use of the term validated its use for others in the online setting. This correlates with a general trend in social media, following Donald Trump's 2025 inauguration, away from political correctness and fact checking. I should not be, but I am occasionally still surprised at how casually this slur is still slung around on the internet, or in-person (in certain circles).

Part of the challenge when it comes to language and ID is that the most 'politically correct' term is still not wholly agreed upon; I have chosen to prioritize 'disability', rather than 'impairment'. I use this term to argue that intellectual disability 1) is an inherently disabling condition, and 2) has not been adequately accommodated. Impairment is an individual experience, a medical or psychological condition, that limits a person's ability to function. Disability gestures toward the social aspect of impairment, whereas an impairment is a medical or psychological condition. Impairment is often considered an individualized experience, a challenge for an individual person to overcome, whereas disability puts the onus on social response to impairment. At least in this case, I do not consider the 'impairment' itself to be a point

[15] Benton, Bond and Daniela Peterka-Benton. "Use of the slur 'retard' triples on X after Elon Musk shares the word in a post". Montclair University, School of Communication and Media News, pp. 1-13. https://www.montclair.edu/school-of-communication-and-media/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/01/Montclair-Social-Media-Study-Musk-and-R-Word-Increase-on-X-1.pdf

worthy of emphasis because impairment is not the problem. There is no ethical 'solution' to intellectual impairment, short of eugenic practices that seek to cure, eliminate, or segregate ID bodyminds.[16] However, there are solutions to intellectual disability. ID has a particular stigma working against it. Lennard Davis has traced the manner with which intelligence was fabricated into the social construction of the intelligence quotient (IQ) through proto-eugenicist Francis Galton and statisticians of the 19C.[17] Cognitive abilities differ from person to person, but this project tracks the way in which intelligence was historically coded in the 19C and how that codification is currently manifested. Today, ID exists in the public consciousness reluctantly, shoved down into the recesses of other neglected social ills. In the day-to-day, we deny that intellectual disability is an issue. This is despite the reality that, as argued by Lennard Davis, anyone can become disabled and that most people will. In fact, many people will encounter some issues related to ID if only because of the effects of aging, along with age-related conditions like Dementia or Alzheimer's. The overlapping practices of memory and cognition convey a person's capacity for rational coherence. Generally, we accommodate people who have impairments and thereby reduce the extent to which they are 'disabled'. Such accommodation occurs through infrastructure like wheelchair ramps or guiderails, or welfare programs, or institutionalization. Mental impairments are, by their intangible nature, more challenging to accommodate. The very act of institutionalization, for instance, is an inherently disabling manner of dealing with disability: institutionalization is an overwhelmingly stigmatizing practice that merely reinforces

[16] Numerous stories/films, especially those in the speculative fiction genre, suggest possibilities of artificially increasing intelligence. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Daniel Keyes' well known short story "Flowers for Algernon" (1959), adapted for screen in 2000, and later parodied with "Flowers for Charlie" in the TV series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Many representations rely on the belief that people only use 10% of their brain, suggesting a near infinitive possibility for intellectual improvement. This narrative trope, seen in a number of films and TV series such as *Limitless* (2011), which was adapted into a series for TV (2015-2016), or *Lucy* (2014), use intelligence as a speculative fiction plot point.
[17] Davis, Lennard. "Disability, Normality, and Power" *The Disability Studies Reader,* Fifth Edition, Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017, pp. 5-6

the Otherness of certain mental conditions. This project is a reminder of a problem shunted to the side. My choice of terminology, then, is a deliberate attempt to sway the conversation toward the social ramifications of being born with, or gaining, an intellectual impairment. I will admit that my choice has its limitations. I use ID despite its broadness. Intelligence, even when it is impaired and disabled in various ways, presents itself along a gradient. Greater intelligence, believed to be reflected in quantities of IQ or GPA, is valued more highly. The valuation of intelligence, as it correlates with an aptitude for labor and for 'personhood', implies a decreased appraisal of people with an intellectual impairment. But, discussions of mental disability, especially in recent years, have focused on accessibility through identity.

While contemporary activists often utilize the term 'neurodiversity' to refer to the variability of mental experience, I utilize both contemporary and historical terms that refer specifically to an individual's intelligence. Neurodiversity is an attempt to dislodge mental impairment from the stigmatizing effects of historical terms. Reconstituted as a form of identity, neurodivergence points to mental difference instead of loss, as is implied with the terms impairment and disability. Efforts to destigmatize disability through terminological shifts have seen pushback. While I believe in this mission of destigmatization, I also recognize its limits. Some conditions are, by their nature, disabling. Intellectual impairment is one of these. Margaret Price, for instance, has explained that neurodiversity's "optimism can flatten individual difference".[18] While I share Price's support for the neurodiversity movement, I also share her criticisms of the blanket optimism it breeds. The oft-antisocial nature of ID mitigates the benefits that identity politics like the neurodiversity movement might have on such demographics. However, I do want to point out the overlap between ID and other forms of mental disability, such as Epilepsy and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These are often comorbid conditions; they can

[18] Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life.* 2014, p. 16.

occur simultaneously in the same individual. Such instances signal the importance of adequate care while maintaining the variability of disability. Unfortunately, the individual differences to which Price refers require specialized care, which comes at a premium.

By prioritizing conditions related to intelligence, my project moves away from broader discussion of madness, insanity, or mental illness. Instead, by fixating on the historical concept of the 'idiot', my project hopes to deconstruct the intricacies of a figure whose dominant trait, a lack of intelligence, is punctured with suspicions of pauperism, sexuality, and racial impurity. This project tracks the residual classed, gendered, and racial characteristics attached to the concept of 'idiocy' as it influences contemporary understandings of ID. I argue that the social and scientific leanings of the 19C continue to influence our understandings of intelligence and 'un-intelligence' today.

Idiocy, Imbecility, and Feeble-Mindedness

Though originally a long-nineteenth century project, this dissertation soon became localized around the Victorian period. The purpose of this concentration is to point out the shift in both scientific and lay discourse about people with intellectual disabilities. This concentration limits the scope of this project to an interval of increased interest in heredity and genetics, an interval of moving perspectives regarding the 'human' and 'personhood' along secularized lines. This, however, puts an important caveat on my discussion of 'intellectual disability'. My analysis of 'idiocy' is not an analysis of the modern construct of 'intellectual disability' but rather is an attempt to trace the construction of this modern image through literature. While this project makes clear the distinction between historical forms of intellectual disability and contemporary forms, it also seeks to illuminate the inconsistencies in modern attitudes toward ID that, I argue, stem from longstanding discomfort with such conditions. Furthermore, this idea cannot be

disentangled from other modes by which people have been historically categorized, hierarchized, and quantified. *Imperfectly Understood* seeks to comprehend the historical significance that 'intellectual disability' has carried with it since the 19C. While primarily invested in a Disability Studies approach to literature, this project embraces the intersectionality inherent in the history of disability, especially considering the events of the mid to late nineteenth century. This project reveals the extent to which disability interacts with other modes of being. While there has been a general move toward progressivism since the 19C, many of its norms and institutions have remained in place. While deeply invested in the 19C, this project sees connections between the past and present in how ID is viewed and dealt with.

Families with intellectual disability are often lower income, a trend which has not changed since the 19C. This is, in simplest terms, because those afflicted with ID are often unable to labor or are inefficient in their labor. Furthermore, many individuals with ID require care. For a project invested in the concept of intellectual disability, the 'idiot boy' became the dominant literary archetype in this era. This is a figure with a deep literary history that received newfound interest at the beginning of the nineteenth century with William Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy", and its titular character Johnny Foy. The 'idiot boys' that permeated literature during the period, especially in Britain, often adhered to Johnny's rustic, nature-oriented innocence. But as industrialization progressed through the century, the 'idiot' became a more contentious figure, considering their frequent reliance on the care of others. The 'idiot boys' of British fiction often belong to impoverished families, reinforcing the precarity of economic situations by constructing a bodymind that often provides little to no extrinsic value. The 'idiot' became a particularly contentious figure because of implications toward labor and the welfare state. This figure becomes a walking, often talking, reminder of political and economic inequality. My project focuses on the aestheticization of this figure, with special attention to the way in which care

functions in this aestheticization. The 'idiot' was a socioeconomically vulnerable person, perhaps the most vulnerable person considering the extent to which they could or could not comprehend their own precarity. Their respective intellectual ability often, though not always, necessitated a social response. Usually, this individual could not labor, at least not without supervision, and thereby provided less labor-value than other individuals; in fact, they may require the labor of another, perpetuating a chain of labor which is then always at a net negative. The stigma that propagates from this view of severe ID, I argue, permeates understandings of ID. Suspicions against those that receive state assistance reinforced political sentiments regarding the welfare state and its dealings with ID. Idiocy, then, becomes tainted with concerns of pauperism and the welfare state. The perception of degenerative conditions, supposedly being spread throughout the nation as the century progressed, became an increasing burden on taxpayers who lamented the use of their taxes in aiding those on the lowest rungs of Western civilization.

My first chapter, "A Revolution of Common Sense", examines Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*, perhaps the least popular of the author's works, as it incorporates idiocy into a historical imagination of the populist Gordon Riots. This chapter traces the use of populist rhetoric as an appeal to the common man, which in Dickens' text becomes an appeal to a commonsense indicative of idiocy. Commonsense becomes antithetical to logic and evidence, instead it is borne from emotion. Barnaby's inclusion, and eventual leadership, of the riots, suggests the idiocy of populist movements that claim to represent the everyday individual, but often appeal to an uneducated majority who view themselves as the oppressed. This chapter, written at the beginning of 2020, rhetorically analyzes the similarities between the Gordon Riots and the January 6 insurrection. The chapter argues that, by appealing to the 'average' individual, populist rhetoric embraces an appeal to fear and anger that borders on the irrationality of the idiot.

19C concerns of degeneration and heredity often revolved around women and their role as mothers. As such, women were doubly capable of encountering ID. When women were afflicted with a condition such as idiocy, the most common apprehension was of sexuality. This was especially concerning with regards to less severe forms of ID, like feeble-mindedness. Eugenic writings expound upon the evils of the lascivious feeble-minded woman who could pass as a normate. Her rampant sexuality would seduce good, honest, normate men. Of course, the evils did not stop there. Such feeble-minded women could then give birth and become mothers, 'contaminating' future generations. These were some of the main concerns for Mary Dendy, a Manchester Country school board member who actively promoted the use of residential schools and 'colonies' for the feeble-minded. Following her inspections of institutions for the feeble-minded across Manchester County, Dendy lamented that "the life of girls such as these is pitiable in the extreme. Year after year they return to the workhouse to bear children, many of them fortunately die but some of them live to repeat their mothers' experience".[19] The feeble-minded woman was particularly threatening due to her penchant for reproducing disabled bodyminds, as evidenced by Henry Goddard's obsessive study of Deborah Kallikak's genealogy. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeblemindedness* extensively traces the Kallikak family tree, assuming Deborah to be the inflection point of generations of individuals diagnosed with feeble-mindedness. The study is a fanatical forewarning of the effects that a single ID woman could have. Goddard's text is notoriously flawed in its methodology. Still, it emphasizes the extent to which conditions like feeble-mindedness were considered a public health threat.

My second chapter, "Feeble-minded Women, Sexuality, and the Politics of Care" examines the poem "Janet Fisher" (1890) by Agnes Mary Frances Robinson as a foray into the concerns around feeble-minded women at end of the century. Notably, the poem explores themes

[19] Dendy, Mary. "The Feeble-Minded and Crime". *The Lancet,* 1902, p. 1462.

of morality as it pertains to the sexual morality of feeble-minded people and the responsibility of caring for vulnerable populations. The poem offers a situation in which a FM woman is placed into proximity with a soldier who fails to recognize her condition. The underpinned sociosexual tension is quickly lost when the pair are placed in the path of a dangerous storm. The poem suggests Janet is both a member of this community deserving of care, while also showing the failure of this form of care. My chapter argues that Janet's perceived sexuality, having exhibited no sexual interest in the poem, limits her ability to fully become a member of the community. This mixture of responsibility and anxiety ultimately results in Janet's death; the community fails to keep her safe from environmental harms.

The third chapter of this project, "Joseph Conrad's 'The Idiots', Maternity, and the Intellectual Uncanny" looks at gender and ID from the perspective of care, more directly. This chapter looks at Conrad's 1896 short story as it reflects the genealogical anxieties that come with genetic conditions like idiocy. Conrad's narrative tells the history of the Bacadou family, at the head of which are husband and wife Jean-Pierre and Susan. This marriage is predicated on the production of labor, and so both parents are horrified when their first child is born intellectually disabled. Desperate to produce an heir to his farm, Jean-Pierre forces Susan to give birth to three more children, all of whom are born disabled. This chapter looks through a feminist lens at Conrad's narrative, arguing that Susan's bodily autonomy is threatened by her husband, who forces her to birth children against her will. Conrad's narration seems ambivalent toward Susan, yet my chapter seeks to reconcile her vexed position in the story. While I acknowledge Susan's responsibility to her children, I also pay attention to the patriarchal oppression that seizes her body for the production of labor, only to instead produce disability. Susan is then continually implicated in the spread of degenerative conditions, becoming a social outcast whose very femininity comes into question.

The eugenic movement was motivated by a perceived racial hierarchy, reinforced through psuedoscience. Eugenic ideology assumes that intellectual impairment can be cured through either limiting the reproduction of people who are believed to be 'deficient' and by encouraging the reproduction of people perceived to be fit. Certain practices sought out how to discern who was who in this racial paradigm. Physiognomy had long claimed that physical characteristics were representative of internal ones. Phrenology, a branch of physiognomy popularized in the early 19C, focused on the skull by measuring its size and shape. This process was especially helpful to Italian Criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who sought to find genetic traits that reflected an inclination toward criminality or immorality. Lombroso notably looked for atavistic and "savage" characteristics, working to emphasize lower forms of life that was both racially and morally degenerated. Working from Darwin's tradition, Lombroso argued for a racist hierarchy of humanity, favoring westernized traits over others. The fear of racial impurity is implicit in eugenic ideology, expressed in a variety of discourses from scientific and political treatises to literature. Concerns around miscegenation and immigration, often proffered that outsiders were "poisoning the blood of our country"[20], blending racism with Nationalistic interests. Anxieties of multiculturalism pervade today; Elon Musk recently spoke to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AFD) Party, claiming that Germany was focusing too much on past guilt while also warning against losing pride in "German culture and German values" which could be lost "in some sort of multiculturalism that dilutes everything".[21] This is, it needs to be pointed out, shortly after Musk was accused of making a Nazi salute during one of Donald Trump's inauguration

[20] Gibson, Ginger. "Trump Says immigrants are 'poisoning the blood of our country.' Biden Campaign likens comments to Hitler". *NBC News,* 17 December 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-says-immigrants-are-poisoning-blood-country-biden-campaign-liken-rcna13014. Accessed 27 March 2025.

[21] Treisman, Rachel. "Elon Musk faces criticism for encouraging Germans to move beyond 'past guilt'". *NPR,* 27 January 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/01/27/nx-s1-5276084/elon-musk-german-far-right-afd-holocaust. Accessed 27 March 2025.

events. It also needs to be pointed out that he made this gesture twice. My project, however, is less fixated on Musk and Trump's 'Nazi' connections, and more concerned with the way in which ableism and racism appear to be making unapologetic returns to the 21st century. The racist commentary is so thinly veiled that, in the early stages of Trump's presidency, one GOP spokesperson claimed that DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) has "become a stand in for being Black and unqualified".[22] The predetermined conclusion, here, is that the most able person, both mentally and physically, is a white male.

My final chapter, "Race and Intelligence in Stephen Crane's 'The Monster'" examines how, during Reconstruction era America, intelligence became a marker of 'whiteness', and a tool for retaining eugenic ideology despite the dissolution of chattel slavery. Crane's narrative is situated around the Trescotts, a white family who employ Henry, a black stable hand. The narrative, early on, situates the young Jimmie Trescott alongside Henry, making numerous claims around how similarly their minds work. Crane's story makes the uncomfortable 19C claim that a white bodymind and a black bodymind are operating at similar capacities. Yet, Crane's story takes a turn when the Trescott home catches fire and Henry, in saving Jimmie, is horribly disfigured, turning him into the titular monster. Yet, Henry's mind is just as affected as his countenance, as he soon exhibits behavior that suggests he is unable to comprehend the things that are happening around him. Part of the challenge of interpreting Crane's narrative is deciding how the reader interprets the narrator, whose unreliability is founded in racist sentiment. Most of Crane's narrative is concerned with the outcome of the Trescott fire, as Dr. Trescott vows to care for the man who saved his son, despite Henry's disfigurement. Crane's story, overtly, raises questions of race and moral responsibility. However, it also suggests a lasting influence of racial trauma that,

[22] "DEI has 'become a stand in for being Black and unqualified': GOP political strategist". *Youtube*, uploaded by CNN, 1 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVKCPyKMS2E&t=313s. Accessed 27 March 2025.

in Henry's case, resembles ID. Henry experiences various moments of incomprehension, borne from emphatic emotion, that limits an ability for cognition. Crane's narrative appears to suggest underlying reasons for a perception of black intelligence, while also scapegoating Henry through the community's discomfort with his appearance. Crane's story distorts otherwise straightforward notions of intelligence by basing them in racial understanding.

This project is the realization of how much Zach, and his disability, have influenced my family's lives. Zach is undoubtedly the most consequential member of my family. Some of this consequential reality was dropped on us when a tumor was discovered in Zach's brain; he had just turned 18. Though benign, the subependymal giant cell astrocytoma (SEGA)[23] threatened to cut off the regular flow of cerebrospinal fluid. Zach's condition was life-threatening. I had vague notions of what was going on: Zach had to go to Cincinnati for surgery. He spent approximately six weeks in the hospital; my mother stayed in the hospital with him most of the time. He also spent much of this time sedated, after the hospital staff discovered his tendency to remove the IV from his arm and wander about his room, also prompting additional surveillance in the form of a doctoral intern who would frequently check in on Zach. While the rest of the family made several trips from Iowa to Ohio, I refused to go, unwilling to acknowledge our familial reality. I am the youngest and therefore felt that denial was my right. Instead, I asked my parents to impose on family friends, allowing me to avoid seeing my brother in the hospital. Six weeks is a long time, and as the holidays approached our family decided to be together in Cincinnati. I acquiesced. The memory is blurry, but I remember the Cincinnati Ronald McDonald House during decorated for Christmas; I remember getting a present, a plastic toy donated from someone, somewhere; It was

[23] For more on SEGA, see Elousrouti, Layla Tahiri, Meryem Lamchahab, Nawal Bougtoub, Hinde Elfatemi, Laila Chbani, Taoufik Harmouch, Mustapha Maaroufi, and Afaf Amarti Riffi. "Subependymal giant cell astrocytoma (SEGA): a case report and review of the literature". *Journal of Medical Case Reports*, Vol. 10, No. 35, 2016, pp. 1-4.

lost on me, then, how many people came together to help my family through this dilemma. It was lost on me just how much effort, how much care, was put into this ordeal by people who hardly knew Zach. I mostly remember Zach in his hospital bed, his head shaven and bandaged. In this sterilized setting, he did not look like my brother. But he seemed normal; he behaved like Zach. He rhythmically snapped his fingers together. He smiled and he hummed along to the room's TV. This ordeal stands out in my mind as an especially traumatic one, but in retelling this story I am also reminded of the mundanity of it. Perhaps this is just because everything my family does is fashioned around Zach; his existence is the implementation of abnormalcy: or a normalcy unique to my family.

"A Revolution of Common Sense"[24]: Idiocy, Populism, and Riot in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*

Prior to the violence and chaos of the Gordon riots depicted in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), there is a curious interaction between the titular Barnaby, a young man referred to by many in the novel as an 'idiot', and his mother, Mary. Despite his mother's reassurances that "summer, autumn, and winter have to pass" before Barnaby's birthday arrives, Barnaby is certain that today is his birthday.[25] He does not remember that it took place merely a week before. Though Barnaby is aware of the changing of the seasons, a phenomenon which should aid his comprehension of the passage of time, he claims that "I remember that it has been so till now". This charming and seemingly benign moment in the novel speaks to the novel's larger engagement with time and history. According to Barnaby, time does not run at a constant pace. Instead, it accelerates and decelerates according to those experiencing it. This is why Barnaby's birthday *must* be today. Barnaby's understanding of time, and the development that can happen within that time, resonates throughout the novel, permeating into the behaviors of the rioters and even the narrative structure. Dickens thereby conflates the populist ideology that instigates the Gordon riots with idiocy.

Dickens' novel critiques populism as an appeal to the average individual. The *OED* defines populism as "the policies or principles of any of [sic] various political parties which seek to represent the interests of ordinary people".[26] This chapter is interested in the 'ordinary' people

---

[24] Donald Trump's second inaugural address focused partly on "Woke" policies his administration plans on rescinding. His address suggested that by returning to more conservative values, American would undergo a "Revolution of common sense". Nelson, Steven. "Trump Declares 'Liberation Day' and 'revolution of common sense' in Second Inaugural Address". *New York Post*, Jan 20, 2025. https://nypost.com/2025/01/20/us-news/trump-declares-liberation-day-and-revolution-of-common-sense-in-second-inaugural-address/

[25] Dickens, Charles, *Barnaby Rudge,* Penguin, p. 151.

[26] "Populism, n. 1." *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, March 2025.

who are placed into proximity beside Barnaby, and how this situates Barnaby amongst his newfound peers, considering his status as an 'idiot' and his unawareness of the political enmity instigating the events of the text. The Gordon riots were spurred on through an appeal to the religious majority in Britain. At least in this case, the ordinary people to whom Gordon appeals, the 'normates' of the 19C, are white, straight, able, male Protestants. The 'revolutionary' potential of this event, given that protestants made up a majority of the English population, was nonexistent. Dickens seems aware of the incongruity of a majority revolting against itself. The Protestant Association, of whom Gordon was the leading member, appealed to their religious peers through circulated literature designed to increase religious animosity against British Catholics. One of the group's pamphlets, *An Appeal from the Protestant Association to the people of Great Britain* (1779), expresses an awareness of this uncomfortable position of anxious power, it reads: "It is not our desire to persecute; but, as Protestants, we are concerned to secure ourselves and posterity from Popish persecution. When we call to mind the Protestant blood that has been shed by Papists, both at home and in foreign countries, we cannot but be excited to use every legal expedient, to prevent the return of such a national calamity".[27] This passage opens and closes with clear reference to the writer's legal strategy to "persecute" Papists. The opening clause, suggesting the author does not want to "persecute" foreshadows a defense of persecution. The ability to "persecute" comes from a position of power. The pamphlet assumes that, should the Papists be granted a modicum of political power, they would perpetuate the "persecution by the Papists in foreign countries" as well as in England, referring to Catholic atrocities such as pregnant women being burned at the stake during the Spanish Inquisition (9). Drawing out these examples, the Protestant Association sought to remind Britons of the terror of Papist persecution

[27] Protestant Association. *An Appeal from The Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain Concerning the Probable Tendency of the Late Act of Parliament in Favour of the Papists.* London: J.W. Pasham, 1779, p. 5.

during the Inquisition, and thereby reestablish Protestant victimhood. Populism relies on a remarkably rudimentary rhetorical maneuver: it repositions 'average' citizens as an oppressed or victimized group.

Populism has taken different forms across history, but one of its most striking, and recent, iterations comes in the form of the MAGA movement. There are similarities and differences between Gordon's and Trump's movements, though both are based in similar ideologies. Notably, both made/make an appeal to the everyday person from a position of authority; both figures are often viewed as "quasi-messianic". Populist movements are often predicated on a cult of personality.[28] This is even more apparent in MAGA than in the 19C, which is partly a result of technological advancements; Trump's exploitation of social media, coupled with the mainstream media's coverage, was often pointed out as an explanation for his 2024 election win.

Populism is a more superficial form of rhetoric, without basis in political ideologies of conservatism vs liberalism. In fact, there are no outright social or economic interests, the means by which political affiliation is commonly discerned. Populism plays on the socio-economic fears of the average person. Oddly enough, the underdog or victim element common in populist rhetoric belies the fact that neither Trump nor Gordon are or were 'average' citizens. Both are or were men of substantial wealth and power. One is a real-estate magnate whose wealth originates from a healthy loan from his self-made millionaire father, the other was a Scottish nobleman and a member of the House of Commons. Yet, both figureheads claim, or claimed, to stand for the forgotten people of their respective nations. Similarly, both generally espouse conservative ideals, though even this is a blanket statement that overshadows the nuances of both Trump's and Gordon's appeal. Global populism has, recently, gravitated toward the right with figures like

[28] Arditi, Benjamin. "Populism, or, politics at the edges of democracy". *Contemporary Politics,* Vol. 9, No. 1, 2003, p. 18.

Hungary's Victor Orbán, but it is not limited to conservatism. Populism, in short, is a frequently paradoxical, often illogical following based on unwavering faith toward some messianic figure, through which 'the people' see their salvation. For Dickens, populism preys on fears and stokes atavistic anger. Dickens' representation of populism displays average citizens supporting Gordon, who quickly disavows the mob rule, which allows Barnaby, Denis, and Hugh to take up this mantle of leadership. The mob is thereby headed by a conglomeration of degenerate types: an idiot, a sociopath, and an uneducated, vagrant, "half a gipsy" (88). The hierarchization of this group with the populism's 'average' individual provides an important linchpin for this chapter's argument. This chapter argues that Dickens deploys depictions of idiocy in *Barnaby Rudge* to critique populism and revolution as legitimate forms of social change.

The Populist Riot and the Irrational Revolution

This chapter argues against the political reduction of riot that comes with its apparent fixation on wanton violence. Even Dickens' populist riots, predicated on speculative fearmongering, exhibit moments of revolutionary activity. While readers might be able to envision revolution or riot, it bears asking exactly where we can discern the linguistic distinction between them. Joshua Clover's *Riot. Strike. Riot.* seeks to accomplish this feat by analyzing the movement of the riot through time. Though Clover reaches several intriguing conclusions, there are two which are pertinent for analysis of Dickens' historical novel: 1) "it is hard, perhaps impossible, to establish what a riot is without periodization"; and 2) "riot is understood to have no politics at all, a spasmodic irruption to be read symptomatically".[29] The first point suggests that riot takes place in linear time, in which the present period "peers back at the riot through the dialectical keyhole" (43). Clover's second point is more tenuous, considering that the reader of

[29] Clover, Joshua. Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings. Verso, 2019, p. 43, 4.

Dickens' work, despite his omniscient narrator, cannot peer into the mind of the crowd or mob. Political action stands at the nascence of the Gordon riots, but it is not entirely possible to tell where this political action ceases, if it does. Clover writes that "The riot, comprising practices arrayed against threats to social reproduction, cannot be anything but political" (47). These threats are often iterated in forms of violence, where Clover designates the problem of distinguishing between riot and revolution. He opines that "The equivocation of riot and violence has been an essential tool in the political reduction of the riot, its cordoning off from politics proper, the measure of which rests implicitly on a model of self-consciousness or its absence" (39). This chapter prioritizes the aspect of self-consciousness as it pertains to Dickens' representation of idiocy and riot. I posit that Dickens exemplifies the populism of the Gordon riots by including Barnaby, showcasing an 'idiot' who becomes an integral part of a crowd of everyday people. Barnaby's inability to think critically is metaphorized by the crowd's faithful adherence to a single figure.

I began writing this chapter at the tumultuous start of 2020, when a crowd of MAGA protestors, at the urging of Donald Trump, marched to the capitol building with the express intent of stopping the confirmation of Joe Biden's presidential win. While Trump watched the violence of that morning's events unfold from the safety of the West Wing, even his peers and supporters began to question how this might influence the legacy of the 45th president of the United States. Though surely an insignificant question to some, but deeply significant to this chapter, was this: What was January 6? Was it a riot? An Insurrection? A day of love?[30] News coverage during and

[30] In a Fox News town hall, Donald Trump responded to in-person questions, one from a former Trump voter who wanted to give Trump a chance to condemn the events of January 6 and thereby earn this resident's vote back. Instead, Trump's response meanders through various nonsensical or contradictory statements before claiming that January 6 was "a day of love". There is a visible audience reaction to this statement and even Trump, at the conclusion of his response, admits "I hope someday we'll get your vote, sounds like maybe I won't, but that's okay". Donald Trump. "Town Hall: Latinos Ask… Donald Trump

after the event tells differing tales. One clip that made the rounds in mainstream and social media showed "Elizabeth from Knoxville" who emotionally describes being maced by police officers after she attempted to enter the capitol building. The interviewer asks Elizabeth why she and her fellow protestors are at the capitol, to which she responds "We're storming the capitol. It's a revolution." Social media took Elizabeth's entitlement to task. Most users were bemused by her recorded admission to criminal activity and her surprise at the consequences of her actions. I refer to Elizabeth to tease out the inconsistencies in the portrayal of crowd action. For Elizabeth, and for her fellow rioters/protesters, January 6 was a 'revolution'. But this is not how the day, at least thus far, has been historicized. If January 6 resulted in an overturning of the 2020 election results, *then* would it have been a revolution? A coup? Considering the continued political motivation, it seems implausible to argue that January 6 was not, through-and-through an attempted revolt. If those involved believe that their actions are revolutionary, are political, how can they be anything but? The facts are: at least four protestors died within two days, one from a gunshot wound, another from being trampled, and others from medical complications such as heart attack or stroke; in the weeks after, at least five police officers died, three from self-inflicted injuries and two from medical complications; about 150 police officers were injured.[31] The extent of trauma is incalculable. I allude to the terminological distinctions between riot and revolution to point out the logical flaws in our binary mode of viewing crowd violence. A cursory comparison between conservative and progressive news outlets helps to demonstrate the disagreement, with conservative-leaning outlets often using less politically charged language or referring to the event merely as "January 6". Still, one of Trump's major campaign promises, albeit a wildly unpopular

---

Responds". *Univision Noticias,* Youtube.com, January 15, video, 1:03:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3tvZi5fTZw.

[31] Cameron, Chris. "These are the People who Died in Connection with the Capitol Riot". *The New York Times.* January 5, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-deaths.html.

one, was to pardon those convicted of assaulting the capitol, a promise he fulfilled with roughly 1,500 pardons on the first day of his presidency. Such clemency was granted even to rioters who assaulted police officers and entered trespassed into the capitol building. This mob, convinced by their luminary figurehead at the "Save America March" that their right to vote had been ripped from their hands, acted firmly believing that their political power had been stolen. It is tempting to dismiss any rationale for involvement in January 6, but such dismissal removes political legitimacy from the events. This discussion suggests that the riot/revolution dichotomy is inextricably entrenched in political discourse: The act of naming is, itself, political.

I look to the Gordon riots as they exemplify a populist form of crowd activity that resembles, at times, acts of insurrection like January 6. Both incidents were predicated on a fervent belief amongst 'silent' majorities, each fearing a loss of political power despite being considered major demographics. 'Elizabeth from Knoxville' would fit in amongst the angry Gordon rioters, at least ideologically speaking, who themselves had been spurred to action through angry populist rhetoric. Both 'protests' predicated themselves on nativist concerns. Just as Trump's supporters believed his election lies, so too were Gordon's supporters sincerely concerned about the spread of Catholic sympathy, and the political capital that the Papists Act promised to non-Protestants. Now, of course, the Gordon riots went on for several days and had numerous opportunities to weave in and out of political activity. Meanwhile, January 6 started at noon with Trump's "Save America March" and became violent around 1 p.m. At 2, protestors breached the capitol building. It was not until shortly after 4 p.m. that Trump recorded and uploaded a video telling his supporters: "We have to have peace. So go home. We love you. You're very special…You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how

you feel. But go home, and go home in peace".[32] Even here, Trump validates his followers' actions, suggesting their behavior is some altruistic response to injustice. Spurred on with such validation, it is worrying to speculate how much more violent that day might have become. Around 6 p.m., police were able to reestablish a perimeter around the building, and by 8 Congress had reconvened to confirm the election results. Though lasting an eternity in public memory, the day passed like any other.

Modern American conservatism has painted liberalism as a political wing unconcerned for the 'average' person. This conversation is especially overt with the "Kamala is for they/them, President Trump is for you" Trump campaign advertisement. A piece of political propaganda that belies the nuances of Kamala Harris' policies toward LGTBQIA+ individuals, the ad argued that Harris was neglecting people who were not a member of certain left-leaning demographics. Playing off the use of pronouns, itself a conservative hot button issue, the ad pithily portrayed Harris as a radical liberal who cared more about identity politics than the quotidian concerns of the blue-collar worker. This was, of course, despite her moderately liberal leanings. Speaking to the majority, populism stokes fears of being marginalized, of becoming the Other. Trump's campaign promises, for example, were predicated on a superficial fear that by prioritizing special interest groups, something was being taken from the 'average' citizen.[33]

Populist language is designed to invoke a sense of abandonment. For Protestants prior to the Gordon riots, for instance, the Papists Act symbolized the British government's acquiescence

---

[32] Donald Trump, "President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protestors". January 6, Washington D.C., video, 1:25, C-Span.org, https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-video-statement-on-capitol-protesters/587285

[33] Some far-right leaning conservatives have expressed a belief in the Great Replacement Theory. This theory, originally produced by Renauld Camus, suggests a hidden cabal of 'elites' who are actively working to replace a supposedly homogenous (likely white) majority group with non-white citizens. This influx of citizens would dilute voting power. Feola, Michael. "Introduction: The Rage of Replacement". *The Rage of Replacement: Far Right Politics and Demographic Fear,* University of Minnesota Press, 2024, p. VIII-IX.

to the spread of Catholicism. With the Papists Act, Catholics might own land or even hold public office, should they be willing to take the Oath of Supremacy. This was an oath required of public officers or religious leaders, in which they were swore allegiance to the English monarch as the leader of the church. By distancing themselves from the Pope's leadership, Catholics would be granted the opportunity to more fully become British. It was not difficult for Gordon to drum up Protestant outrage at the increase in Catholic rights. However, while this example is tinged with religious animosity, it is worth pointing out that most populist movements, and even the Gordon riots, are often instigated because of economic complaints. Trump's 2024 campaign was headlined by anti-immigration and economic legislation, contradictorily arguing that he would remove illegal immigrants (many of whom work in the agriculture industry) and simultaneously decrease grocery prices. Trump's rhetoric does not get bogged down in details, and he has yet to explain how his plan to remove agricultural labor and place tariffs on imported goods will, in any way, decrease costs for American consumers. The seemingly illogical strategies that Trump has promised does not faze his followers. Supporters generally express faith in Trump that resists logic. But I do not want to delegitimize Trump's supporters or their concerns; the discontent to which MAGA rhetoric appeals is not insignificant and not limited to the U.S. Expansive research conducted since the 1980s has pointed to economic globalization, subjecting individual economies to the shocks of global trade, as a potential cause for the rise in European populism, though Andreas Bergh and Anders Kärna push against this conclusion.[34] While the threat of global trade might be a factor, research also emphasizes cultural concerns, often founded on the belief that elites are "endangering the values, identities, and practices of a culturally constituted people, its memories, origins, and ways of life".[35] This is at the crux of populist rhetoric, a "rage

[34] Bergh, Andreas, and Anders Kärna. "Globalization and Populism in Europe". *Public Choice,* Vol. 189, 2021, p. 66.
[35] Boyte, Harry C. "Populism—Bringing Culture Back In". *The Good Society,* Vol. 21, No. 2, 2012, p. 300.

of the left behind", a perception that the interests of an Other has been prioritized over 'the people'.[36]

Dickens' novel navigates a historical inflection point through the lens of an individual who supposedly cannot think critically. The construction of Dickens' narrative makes it difficult to trace any organization, any semblance of deliberate strategy that would suggest political motivation on behalf of his rioters. The anti-Catholic sentiment, in particular, is difficult to track considering the amount of information that various scenes throw at the reader. Instead, Dickens' representation revives the Gordon riots as a critique of populism and the public action that can result from it. He makes a point to emphasize the class violence, violence that is not inherent to the anti-Catholic Populist origin of the movement, though there was often overlap between religious and class-based animosity. The houses of various lords are burned to the ground and their owners are forced to watch. Carriages carrying wealthy passengers are stopped in the street, their passengers ripped from the safety of their private space and thrown out onto the cobblestones. It is worth considering Barnaby's economic rationale for joining the riots. Is Barnaby acting out violent and atavistic violence or is he part of a larger ideological movement predicated on inequality? Clover's theorization suggests that riot cannot be so easily dissected. While the Gordon riots originate due to anti-Catholic sentiment, the wealth-based implications behind the violence suggests that this violence was inherently political. Dickens invokes the idiot, as an uneducated and often impoverished individual, as a helpful symbol for the irrationality of the Gordon riots.

The Politics of Dickens' Riot

[36] Feola, p. VII.

Barnaby's condition becomes symbolic of the populist riot's overarching apolitical nature. Duped by the leaders of the riots, one of them being Gordon himself, Barnaby is ingratiated into the fold without any political ideology of his own. I would argue that this naivete is not limited to Barnaby, since Hugh also seems unfamiliar with the specific goals of the riots. This results in one of the more amusing scenes, wherein Dickens stretches his wordplay to accommodate Hugh's lack of education. During the riots, "No Popery" is chanted repeatedly, in emphatic defiance of the Papists Act. Hugh emphatically joins in with: "No Property, brother!" (316). Though his fellow rioters correct him, the wordplay is easily tracked with some historical context. Among its corrections, the Papists Act allowed Catholics to own property. So, to dismiss popery (or Catholicism) was to dismiss Catholics' rights, such as the right to property. The riots, both historically and literarily, targeted areas of economic and state power. Arguably, the most famous scene from *Barnaby Rudge* is the storming of Newgate prison, which doubled as a debtor prison. The economic stakes are surely not lost on the reader, who is aware of Barnaby's reason for rioting. Like many of his fellow rioters, Barnaby is duped into violence through the promise for wealth and social mobility. When Stagg, an individual loosely affiliated with Barnaby's murderous father, arrives at the Rudge household, he preys upon Barnaby's naivete; Stagg claims that "Your mother, poor soul, would be happier if she was richer" (382), and motivates Barnaby to seek his fortune "in the world…the merry world; not in solitary places like those you pass your time in, but in crowds, and where there's noise and rattle" (383). Stagg manipulates Barnaby into joining the riots. Believing that the riots are a legitimate means of providing for his mother, Barnaby dives headlong into the violence that overshadows the politics of the movement. In fact, the original politics of the Gordon riots soon dissipate, as its leaders withdraw from their public space at the head of their movement. This enables a more public-facing form of ID than present in most of the 19C texts with which this project engages. Barnaby earns his place as the titular

character partly because he is allowed to roam freely amongst the rioters. He is able to be, as Stagg promises, "in the world". But this blatant visibility places Barnaby in a precarious position. The irony of a riot being led, at least in part, by an 'idiot' speaks to Dickens' engagement with populist politics. Dickens has some fun portraying a scene of irrationality, led by the person who is viewed as the pinnacle of irrationality.

Barnaby's figurehead status becomes apparent during the first violent moments of the narrative's riots, when a flag is thrust into his hands by a fellow rioter. Clover suggests that the police are a fundamental aspect of riot, an antagonist by which the riot reaches its status *as riot*.[37] It is no coincidence, then, that Barnaby takes his place on the frontlines at this juncture. Given this striking image, Barnaby quickly becomes one of the riot's most prominent figures. This is partly because, when the stakes of the riots become legible to him, *Barnaby*'s George Gordon disappears, replaced by three of Dickens' characters: Ned Denis the former hangman who longs for a legal way to kill again, Hugh the barbaric and illegitimate son of the murderer John Chester, and Barnaby the 'idiot'. While Ned and Hugh are eventually hanged for their trespasses against the body politic, Barnaby is saved in the final hour, largely because of his condition which limits his ability to understand the significance of his actions. Of course, there is a certain irony in basing a historical novel around Barnaby, who comprehends time and progressive reform outside conventional understandings. Barnaby's reason for riot is inconsistent with the crowd, who the reader assumes riot because of anti-Catholic sentiment and not plunder or treasure, as is Barnaby's rationale. But Dickens opens up the possibility that not all of the Gordon rioters are rioting for the same reason. While the novel is encumbered by numerous branching subplots, each replete with numerous characters, Barnaby's arguable protagonist status complicates a narrative that is fundamentally based in the nascent period of liberalism. His engagement with, but limited

[37] Clover, p. 47.

understanding of, the events in which he partakes critiques the actions of the rioters—whose own actions resemble the 'idiot' at the head of their procession.

Barnaby's condition, an amalgamation of madness and idiocy that clouds his cognitive capacity, is reflected in the riots that surround him. The riots are frequently metaphorized as madness made manifest, as "The whole great mass were mad" (536). This is partly a subtle gesture toward Lord Gordon's perceived mental instability as well as a more general critique of riot and revolutionary violence. The crowd which had accompanied Gordon to the House of Commons dissipated at first, but inevitably reconstituted in mob form, resulting in riots which would cause hundreds of deaths, threatening to erupt into a full-scale revolution. In Dickens' novel, this mass experience is manifested as madness. Though continually referred to as an 'idiot', Barnaby's behavior vacillates between readerly expectations of cognitive impairment and mental illness, or idiocy and madness, to use the historical terms. While he exhibits childlike behavior and a faulty memory, he also exhibits moments of lucidity which bely his supposed intellectual impairment. On the other hand, he also performs various acts which exemplify his "creative imagination",[38] which suggests eccentric madness, while seeming perfectly sensible at other times. Yet there is still an overarching pessimism regarding Barnaby's condition; for instance, when Gabriel Varden claims to Mary that "To my mind he [Barnaby] grows wiser every day", the narrator infers from Mary's reaction that she believes Varden "spoke from no conviction of his own".[39] Varden's sentiment pushes a hope for Barnaby's eventual enlightenment, but he does so with overt insincerity, according to the narrator. Barnaby's intellectual habilitation becomes an irrelevant discussion and is often overshadowed by his various eccentricities. Critics of the novel as well as scholars have extensively debated whether

[38] Pedlar, Valerie. "Madness and Marriage". *The Most Dreadful Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction.* Liverpool University Press, 2006, p. 50.
[39] *Barnaby,* p. 51.

Barnaby is an idiot or whether he is a madman. I propose to move beyond this question of authenticity and instead focus on Barnaby's intellectual capacity. My analysis focuses on Barnaby's apparent cognitive stasis in light of *Barnaby Rudge*'s historical context. In other words: Why does Dickens' novel, so heavily invested in political progress, revolve around a figure who exists in a state of arrested development and how does this shift an understanding of Dickens' political ideology?

Riot, Through the Dialectical Keyhole

Both riot and revolution, in the public consciousness, perpetuate a chronology of political transformation that is not as straightforward as we like to think. This, I argue, is partly the reason for centering the novel around Barnaby, whose understanding of time conflicts with standardized conceptions. By narrativizing Barnaby's non-standard experience of time, Dickens distorts a chronological narrative of historical events by basing them in two different temporalities: normative time and crip time. Normative time is standardized time; this time is linear, represented by a movement toward futurity or, in the case of Dickens, toward revolution. However, in the language of disability, normative time reflects movement toward 'cure'. "Curative time", according to Alison Kafer, refers to the medical model of disability, which disallows the futurity of disability by suggesting disability as something that can, and should, be remedied.[40] The correlation with David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* is unimpeachable given that the very act of imposing a prosthetic implies the curing of impairment in time. Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) further expands on the relation of disability to time, suggesting that crip time is "flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what

[40] Kafer, Alison. "Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips". *Feminist, Queer, Crip.* Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 27.

can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies" (27). Of some significance here is David Harvey's discussion of aesthetic theory, from *The Conditions of Postmodernity,* in which he argues that "any system of representation…is a spacialization of sorts which automatically freezes the flow of experience and in doing so distorts what it strives to represent".[41] This is to say that representation relies upon distortions of time to depict space. Furthermore, time might be experienced differently based on any number of factors, such as "subgroup" and "culture" (202). Though he perhaps does not intend to, Harvey ventures into a discussion of crip time. The novel is temporally limited by its own medium, just as many other mediums are similarly informed by their differences. But Dickens' novels have a secure place in Disability studies, particularly if we consider the notorious narrative prosthetic[42] example of Tiny Tim and other figures, such as Barnaby, who essentially exist in "curative time" as the novels only conclude with the elimination of disability.[43] But beyond Dickens, the nineteenth-century's relation to crip time is especially problematic because of the increased reliance upon standardized time. Temporal expectations solidify throughout the period with technological and industrial progress. In her chapter, "Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips", Kafer claims that crip time "bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" as opposed to the inverse (27); therefore, instead of looking toward a moment in time in which the body is restored, rehabilitated, or regenerated, Kafer argues that disability slows or stagnates standardized time.

---

[41] Harvey, David. *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Blackwell Publishing, 1990, p. 206.
[42] Scholars such as Paul Longmore, in "'Heaven's Special Child': The Making of Poster Children" point to Tiny Tim as emblematic of the exploitation of disabled children. The sentimentalism inherent in Tiny Tim's various portrayals capitalizes on disability aesthetics by reinforcing dependent stereotypes for monetary gain.
[43] For more on sentimentality, melodrama, and disability, see Martha Stoddard Holmes' *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Litertature.* University of Michigan Press, 2004, p. 1-2.

Barnaby's mental status is a point of emphasis in the novel because of 'idiocy's' supposed permanence. This runs counter to Victorians' fixation on 'perfectibility', the belief that the human is the single creature capable of remembering experiences, reflecting upon these experiences, and thereby learning from them. Perfectibility happens in time. It requires the opportunity for reflection. Rousseau writes that "every animal has ideas because it has senses";[44] but this leaves little distinction between man and beast. Expanding upon his definition, Rousseau specifically targets "the faculty of self-improvement" as an integral aspect of humanity, describing this as a "faculty which, with the help of circumstance, progressively develops all our other faculties, and which in man is inherent in the species as much as in the individual" (88). There are several moving parts here which deserve to be discussed with respect to my subject matter. Firstly, Rousseau's allusion to 'circumstance' points toward specific instances that result in habilitation or education that have progressively developmental influences. We do not learn without experiences experienced in normative time; Rousseau does not allow for the possibility of crip time. He, perhaps unintentionally, discerns between Barnaby and the rest of humanity because of the idiot's inherent inability to self-improve. This leads me to the second point which I hope to make regarding the philosopher: the supposed connection between the species and the individual. Rousseau automatically connects these two entities and their capacity for self-improvement. Similarly, Julia Douthwaite targets the interest in the L'homme régénéré, the regenerated man, that emerges largely because of the French revolution. She points to attempts to educate mentally disabled individuals, drawing a parallel between their habilitation/regeneration and a national rejuvenation that arises from "spontaneous, collective action".[45] Douthwaite continues by suggesting that "A revolution posits the notion not only that individuals are

---

[44] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Penguin Books, 1984, p. 87.
[45] Douthwaite, Julia V. *The Wild Girl Natural Man and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment.* University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 167.

malleable, but also that the whole body politic may be changed" (161). Revolution is thereby perceived as an event of education, a chance for national enlightenment.[46] Because of the connections between Barnaby and the mob, progress for Barnaby is similarly progress for the riots; conversely, a lack of progress for the mob is a lack of progress for Barnaby. Since Barnaby's condition is supposedly unchanging, Dickens dangles the potential for revolutionary progress while depicting the irrationality of the riots themselves. Of course, Rousseau remains pessimistic regarding government when he writes that "a people that would always govern well would not need to be governed".[47] While Rousseau argues that any body politic is subject to degeneration since its nascence,[48] he similarly suggests that the contamination of public interests with the personal is a danger to the perpetuation of the body (46); such personal interests are played out under the guise of revolution in Dickens' literature, thereby tainting the potential for a regenerated body politic through political action. *Barnaby Rudge*'s outcome is therefore contingent upon the titular character's intellect; to provide a fulfilling ending for British readers, both the riots and Barnaby's disability require a satisfying conclusion, lest Dickens invoke the ire of his reader's sensibilities. Yet, the interweaving of the historical novel and mental impairment invokes certain questions, most significantly: To what extent does Barnaby's impairment seep into the surrounding narrative?

I argue that Dickens' revolutionary politics mirror crip time. His representation of Barnaby initially places the titular character beyond habilitation and thereby outside a possible

---

[46] Various feral children such as Peter the Wild Boy and Victor of Aveyron received international attention due to the manner in which they complicate definitions of humanity. Efforts to educate such individuals came with mixed results, though most often disappointed the public. Still, individuals such as Daniel DeFoe followed these efforts closely, noting that even though Peter "may have some Degrees of *Idiotism*" he also retained "some apparent Capacities of being restored and improved" Daniel DeFoe. *Mere Nature Delineated Or A Body without a Soul Being Observations Upon the Young Forester Lately Brought to Town From Germany with Suitable Applications. Also, a Brief Dissertation Upon the Usefulness and Necessity of Fools, Whether Political or Natural* (London: T. Warner, 1726), p. 25.
[47] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract.* Translated by G.D.H Cole, 1920, p. 47.
[48] Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 60.

futurity, according to Kafer's definition of crip time;[49] but in the final pages of the novel, Dickens reverses course and, to a certain extent, cures Barnaby of his impairment, thereby enabling his inclusion in the future at the expense of his disability. In this way, Barnaby's inexplicably regenerated state satirizes revolutionary optimism. The riots, of which Barnaby is an unknowingly integral part, fail to enact their original intention. In the final paragraphs of the novel, Dickens drastically alters the dominant characteristic of his titular character, thereby diverging from the novel's conflation of political longevity with idiocy's physiologically determined permanence. In other words, while Barnaby's intellectual status symbolizes longstanding political infrastructure throughout most of the novel, the narrative prosthetic erasure of his disability signals the laughable prospect of similarly dynamic political change. The populist movement was never going to enact change, argues Dickens.

Due to the number of subplots and concurrent events, *Barnaby Rudge*'s narrative structure necessitates instances of temporal disabling. While the reader is left to imagine the rest of the city submerged in flames, Dickens points them to a singular moment and place which pushes certain narratives along, which have little bearing on the historical events surrounding them. Perhaps the most glaring instance is the abduction of Emma Haredale and Dolly Varden by Hugh and Dennis. The scene heightens the stakes of the riots while it simultaneously diminishes political motivation. It helps concretize Dickens' broader criticism of the riots when he suggests that the mass "never reasoned or thought at all, but were stimulated by their own headlong passions, by poverty, by ignorance, by the love of mischief, and the hope of plunder" (438). It should be noted that a number of these purposes can be attributed to Barnaby, himself, as well as the general mass of rioters. But in this scene, Hugh and Dennis transition from their roles as the riot's leaders to deviants, threatening sexual violence upon the two young women. There is a

[49] *Barnaby*, p. 31.

moral distinction which Dickens appears to be making here; while Hugh and Dennis are rioting partly for "passions" or "mischief" or "plunder", they do not do so out of "ignorance", as Barnaby does. The contextual cues behind who is performing these acts of riot re-legitimize the politics of riot; the riots are perpetuated by "headlong passions" borne from nonthought—but the emotional underpinnings of these actions do not, by themselves, delegitimize the political stakes of the action. Essentially, Dickens incorporates this scene to reveal the fragility of the riot as political action. Rather than exemplifying historical and political progress, this scene presents Hugh and Dennis as moral and political degenerates, figures using the pretense of political action for the satiation of base desires. At the same time, immediately following this scene, Hugh receives intelligence that Barnaby has been captured; Hugh immediately rallies his followers for an assault on Newgate to save Barnaby, for whom Hugh feels a sense of responsibility. Various scenes such as these treat the Gordon riots as a fluid entity, at times beckoning the reader to empathize with the mass of hopeful revolutionaries, while subsequently abhorring their senseless and shameful actions.

Even when Dickens does depict the riots in a concrete manner the narrative is still bogged down by the very challenge of relaying such a widespread event as the Gordon Riots. Most significantly, chapters sixty through sixty-eight relay the climactic storming of Newgate Prison, shifting between various scenes with either historical and/or narrative interest. It bears mentioning that, of the novel's eighty-two chapters, these nine deal with the riot's most concerted effort, depicting the actions of a conglomerated mob targeting violence state-run Newgate. However, possibly due to the challenge of depicting such a large-scale event as the Gordon Riots, as mobs erupt and snuff themselves out only to burst forth in a different area at a different time, Dickens must leave the reader to their own imagination to envision the destruction occurring on

the periphery of any depicted scene. Dickens himself points to this difficulty with the opening sentences of chapter fifty-two, writing:

> A mob is usually a creature of very mysterious existence, particularly in a large city. Where it comes from or whither it goes, few men can tell. Assembling and dispersing with equal suddenness, it is as difficult to follow to its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable or more cruel. (429)

Dickens' description fixates on the rapidity with which the mob can both appear and disappear; to be sure, Dickens' gestures to the ambiguous definitions of the crowd and the mob. The crowd can swiftly and instinctively surpass natural violence. In both *A Tale* and *Barnaby Rudge*, terms of madness and irrationality are frequently tied in with watery imagery to display the unpredictable nature of a crowd. For example, just as we see in the passage above, the storming of the Bastille in *A Tale* is accomplished with a mob that, like a "living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth" and "overflowed the city" (163). Following the assault upon the Bastille, the mob is described in the throes of "bloody-minded anger" as they "came pouring down into the streets…urging one another, and themselves, to madness with the wildest cries and actions" (168). The fluid nature of their madness evokes a measure of dynamism to their violence; the continual nature of their violence only surges because of a continual re-urging, suggesting a herd mentality that perpetuates their mental state.[50] Each individual engaging in this revolutionary act perpetuates each other's actions and attitudes in time which seems to move all the quicker for the randomness of the riot itself.

[50] Gustave Le Bon suggests that the crowd can inflict upon its individuals a variety of characteristics including 'collective hallucinations', utilizing a metaphor of 'contagion' by which these characteristics are circulated. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind.* Loki's Publishing, p. 23.

The frenzied nature of revolutionary moments speeds time, while at other moments time drastically slows. In this way, normative time and crip time collapse in Dickens' texts. This is most effectively relayed when Dickens is engaging with disability as he does in *Barnaby*. Gordon Spence goes so far as to suggest that Dickens' depiction of the storming of Newgate reflects a sense of "mass hysteria" and "frenzy" (26), terms that effectively connote both the sentiment of the historical moment but also the organization of Dickens' plot. The frenzied orientation of the Newgate chapters inhibits normative temporal progress as the reader is jarringly whisked across multiple interweaving subplots, leaving subsequent groups of characters in stasis. There is little sense of stability. While the sentimental reunion of Barnaby and his father occurs inside Newgate, the 'action' shifts outside, granting the reader the chance to witness the burning of Newgate from the perspective of the newly elected leaders of this organized riot. The novel's disorder gets more and more chaotic as the climax approaches. Notably, Irene Collins also refers to a deliberate rapidity in *A Tale of Two Cities*, suggesting that, as the revolution accelerates, so too does the pace of writing;[51] she points out that several important events in the period, such as the federalist revolt and dechristianization movement, are written with extreme brevity. Dickens' acuity towards revolutionary time pervades across multiple novels, but is perhaps most concisely described in *A Tale* as a "strange law of contradiction" in which "the time was long, while it flamed by so fast" (205).

As the Gordon riots reach their climax the narrative struggles to maintain temporal coherence due to the rapidity with which events transpire; as a result the narrator becomes unsure of themselves. The burning of Newgate imagines this particularly vividly:

[51] Collins, Irene. "Charles Dickens and the French Revolution". *Literature and History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1990, p. 53.

> It seemed not a minute's work from first to last. He [Barnaby Sr] staggered to his feet, incredulous of what had happened, when the yard was filled again, and a crowd rushed on, hurrying Barnaby among them. In another minute – not so much: another minute! the same instant, with no lapse or interval between! he and his son were being passed from hand to hand, through the dense crowd in the street, and were glancing backward at a burning pile which some one said was Newgate. (540)

Following the long-awaited reunion of father and son, they are quickly passed from rioter to rioter, in a liberatory ceremony. Barnaby Jr's place amongst the rioters is, at this point in the novel, one of high esteem and thus the rioters ensure his safety from the burning prison. There are several aspects in this passage that deserve attention due to the overt uncertainty of the narrator. There is a notable doubt as to the length of time which this action takes. They correct the initial length of time, suggesting that it took "another minute – not so much", yet the narrator insists that time continues to move forward with "another minute" quickly thereafter. Furthermore, the use of the present participle challenges this passage to continue occurring in the present despite temporal confusion implied by something occurring "the same instant, with no lapse or interval between" while simultaneously occurring in "another minute" and yet "another minute". The aesthetic created by this relay of the rioters movements, the handing of both Barnabys from one rioter to the next, generates a lasting moment in which Barnaby is granted a moment to glance backward at the wreckage of the prison. Of course, the reader cannot be entirely sure how large this "dense crowd" is, and therefore their understanding of the length of time it takes for the pair of Barnabys to reach safety is not clear. But this spatio-temporal confusion is further entrenched with the final sentence from this passage, in which the narrator is not even certain that the "burning pile" was, in fact, the prison from which the father and son were rescued; instead, the reader is left to hearsay. Dickens' progression through this passage suggests a deliberate attempt to distort time

and space, to create a sense of uncertainty in light of the rapidity of events. The passage is as devoted to the time that the event takes as it is devoted to the event itself. Of course, Dickens' temporal aesthetic does not limit itself to linear distortion.

Because of Dickens' choice of narrative style and the rapidity with which events occur during the novel, many chapters in the novel occur out of chronological order, thereby destabilizing the reader's experience. For example, chapters 63 through 65 portray the efforts of prominent rioters Hugh and Dennis as they reach Newgate to free its prisoners, including Barnaby; chapters 66 through 67 track Mr Haredale's search for his niece, Emma, following her abduction, culminating in his reunion with Joe Willet. However, this sequence of events pushes the narrative to the subsequent night of the storming of Newgate. But chapter sixty-eight resituates the reader with Barnaby and his father shortly after their reunion in Newgate. The chapter opens with the passage "While Newgate was burning on the previous night, Barnaby and his father…stood in Smithfield, on the outskirts of the mob, gazing at the flames like men who had been suddenly roused from sleep" (565). It bears mentioning that Barnaby and his father have been left in stasis since chapter sixty-two, at the end of which the narrator describes their conflicted reunion. Since then, the reader has witnessed the burning and storming of Newgate from the outside, and is therefore thrust back in time to the moment just following the father-son encounter. What is particularly striking regarding this sequence is the lost experience following their previous discussion; suddenly the pair are outside Newgate prison in Smithfield. Though Newgate and Smithfield are just blocks away from each other, even the characters appear shocked to discovered their location and "Some moments elapsed before they could distinctly remember where they were, or how they got there" (565). Barnaby's fallible memory is a fundamental aspect of his condition, but in this instance his father, and even the reader, experiences a sense of spatio-temporal displacement. The memory of the past few minutes is lost,

creating an interval of experience lost to the past, unexperienced by both characters and reader. But, placed into the larger narrative, this passage conceptualizes Barnaby's everyday experience, an interval of time experienced but neither recognized nor remembered.

In fact, as the climax approaches Dickens alters between various subplots, ignoring key events, building tension only to explain to the reader that the conflict is already over. The reader can see that, following Hugh's impassioned pleas for Barnaby's stay of execution, a widespread concern for the fate of this poor idiot boy proliferates; but the reader is left to wonder of his fate as chapter 77 comes to a close and they are instead whisked to another subplot in chapter 78. Curiously enough, chapter 79 begins with a discussion between Edward, Emma, and Mr Haredale in Varden's locksmith shop, The Golden Key. Mrs. Varden's shriek can be heard from upstairs, and the group rushes to the window, looking out upon a dense mob through which Gabriel Varden forces his way. In his hand is Barnaby, "not Barnaby in the spirit, but in flesh and blood, with pulses, sinews, nerves, and beating heart, and strong affections" (662). The narrator's caveat suggests that Barnaby's spiritual existence has permeated beyond himself. To be sure, Barnaby's mental and spiritual qualities represented by his impairment have permeated into the actions of the rioters. But the narrator explicitly relays the physical being whose heart yet beats and blood yet flows as a result of Gabriel's incessant workings through the previous day and night. Curiously enough, the reader hears of Gabriel's efforts only after the fact:

> They [Haredale and Varden] had striven all the previous day to rescue Barnaby from his impending fate. Failing in their attempts, in the first quarter to which they addressed themselves, they renewed them in another. Failing there, likewise, they began afresh at midnight; and made their way, not only to the judge and jury who had tried him, but to men of influence at court, to the young Prince of Wales, and even to the antechamber of the king himself. (662)

It can be persuasively argued that these efforts, important to the plot and finale of the novel though they may be, would not make for particularly compelling reading; this is the reason that the reader does not get to experience them in real-time. Yet I opine that this is a less persuasive reason to have what would be the climax of the novel occur off-screen, or after the fact. These repeated attempts to pardon Barnaby resemble the very actions events of the riots themselves. The Gordon riots take place over roughly eight days, from June 2nd to June 9th of 1780. In Dickens' novel, the riots (in their violent form) begin with Barnaby knocking a soldier from his horse, in chapter 49 (413) and end with Hugh and Dennis's deaths, which are also notably not depicted, in chapter 77 (649). Of course, these events might be fluid depending on how one interprets the beginning and ending of rioting. Regardless, it is notable that Dickens expends roughly 236 of 688 pages of his novel to the riots themselves, while neglecting to depict the outcome of the riots for specific characters who are so integral to the plot. In the reader's mind, Barnaby is hung in chapter 77 following the concealed deaths of Hugh and Dennis, only to be resurrected, or recalled to life, [52] in chapter 79; thus, it is surprising when Dickens finally reveals Barnaby pulled by Varden through the crowd outside The Golden Key, "gazing at the throng as if he were newly risen from the dead, and felt himself a ghost among the living" (662). Barnaby's isolation from the public is distinct as the difference between life and death. Though Barnaby appears as apparition, his form remains incorporeal—starkly separated from the public he spearheaded into revolutionary action.

Cripping Time, Executing Barnaby

[52] The title of *A Tale*'s first book. The second chapter notably opens with the conveyance of the message "Recalled to life", referring to attempts to rescue Alexandre Manette from a French prison. Notably, themes of resurrection and regeneration are maintained throughout both *A Tale* and *Barnaby Rudge.*

As the momentum of the riots diminishes, the stakes of the novel are revealed, with the realization that they will never quite accomplish what they initially intended. Rather than emerging as a moment of British revolution akin to that of the French, the Gordon riots remain something of an historical afterthought, a sequence of rebellious days overshadowed by successful revolution. Dickens' anxiety toward rebellion and revolution is clearly exhibited through *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge*. The numerous maimings and deaths in each novel indicate the repercussions for those who instigate such violence, whether this be the crippling of Simon Tappertit or the explosive death of Madame DaFarge. Therefore, when Barnaby, Hugh, and Dennis are captured and sentenced to execution at noon on the following day, the reader is acutely aware of the gravity of their predicament. The nighttime slows as Dickens' narrator exploits the dramatic tension:

> The time wore on: the noises in the streets became less frequent by degrees, until silence was scarcely broken save by the bells in church towers, marking the progress – softer and more stealthy while the city slumbered – of that Great Watcher with the hoary head, who never sleeps or rests. In the brief interval of darkness and repose which feverish towns enjoy, all busy sounds were hushed; and those who awoke from dreams lay listening in their beds, and longed for dawn, and wished the dead of the night were past. (638)

The darkness of night, which in small towns grants an opportunity for rest, is perverted in the heart of London. After several days of rampant violence, a dreadful calm hangs over London. But as the city sleeps, those who awaken foresee the inevitable outcome of the riots, an inevitability reflected by the rising of the sun. Just as *A Tale of Two Cities* culminates in the construction of the guillotine and the execution of Sidney Carton, the impending execution of the Gordon rioters hangs over the final chapters of *Barnaby Rudge.* And though most of the city sleeps, an ominous project is constructed as the sun rises on the morning of execution: "And now the sun's first

beams came glancing into the street; and the night's work, which, in its various stages and in the varied fancies of the lookers-on had taken a hundred shapes, wore its own proper form – a scaffold, and a gibbet" (639). The scaffold's construction takes on supernatural qualities as it appears to mold itself throughout the night. Dickens' depiction of this end to the Gordon riots relies on themes of light and darkness which seeks to solve the problem of both the Gordon riots and Barnaby's condition, a condition marked by the narrator's lamentation that "no dawn had broken on his [Barnaby's] long dark night" (371). As the sun rises on the morning of his execution, "All was brightness and promise, excepting in the street below, into which (for it yet lay in shadow) the eye looked down as into a dark trench, where, in the midst of so much life, and hope, and renewal of existence, stood the terrible instrument of death. It seemed as if the very sun forbore to look upon it" (640). Though the sun rises, the narrator maintains an overt indecisiveness regarding the extent to which the sun's rays affect the morning. Though time, as represented by the sun, passes, it remains to be seen where, and on whom, this light will shine.

The scaffold becomes a prominent symbol on the day of Barnaby's execution as the two entities are paired together, sharing marked similarities regarding their place in civilized society. As the crowd gathers to witness the rioters' executions, their discomfort with the whole situation becomes more evident. The narrator describes the disquietude regarding the now-visible scaffold, lamenting the visibility which the advanced day has granted to the device:

> But it was better, grim and sombre in the shade, than when, the day being more advanced, it stood confessed in the full glare and glory of the sun, with its black paint blistering, and its nooses dangling in the light like loathsome garlands. It was better in the solitude and gloom of midnight with a few forms clustering about it, than in the freshness and the stir of morning: the centre of an eager crowd. It was better haunting the street like a spectre,

> when men were in their beds; and influencing perchance the city's dreams; than braving the broad day, and thrusting its obscene presence upon their waking senses. (640)

The narrator repeatedly insists that "it was better" when the night hid the obscene presence of the scaffold. The comparison between the past night and present morning is paralleled by the nighttime laborers and the morning crowds which now eagerly await the scaffolds victims. The scaffold appears all the more obscene in the daylight, as it suddenly becomes a reality for the populace, an unfortunate solution to social ills that can no longer remain hidden in their unconscious thoughts. Barnaby's proximity to the device further interweaves the crowd's guttural reactions to the scaffold with their reactions to mental disability. Barnaby's condition, mostly relegated to the shadows, as we see with Barnaby's nightly walks, is thrust into the light. He does not exist in the "solitude and gloom of midnight" but is abruptly shoved into the public consciousness. The monumental nature of this mass experience is driven home in a single image that blends the ephemeral nature of time with lasting memory. But the image also toys with Dickens' continued theme of light and darkness, one to which he would return with the construction of the guillotine in *A Tale*. As the sun advances toward noon, and the moment of Barnaby's execution nears, time seems to slow to an agonizing pace as the public becomes aware of their culpability in Barnaby's nearing demise.

The latter moments of the novel are punctuated by temporal cues that create an overwhelming awareness of temporal progress, primarily in the juxtaposition of the sun and the ominous chiming of church bells. The bells chime first at five a.m., marking numerous hours and half-hours to the time execution at noon. Yet they serve little purpose for the crowd, "Nor had they any need to hear it, either, for they could see it in the people's faces. So surely as another quarter chimed, there was a movement in the crowd – as if something had passed over it – as if the light upon them had been changed – in which the fact was readable as on a brazen dial,

figured by a giant's hand" (641). In conjunction with Dickens' repeated references to the time of day, the reader is made overtly aware of the passage of time in the waning moments of the novel. The momentousness of the event seeps into the temporal measuring devices, both the church bell and this ineffable "brazen dial". Yet, the event's significance is primarily registered via the faces of the crowd.[53] The lighting suddenly shifts over *Barnaby*'s crowd; their realization and perception of the coming event invokes a return to Barnaby's mental condition, one steeped in continual darkness. The revolution that would eventually succeed in *A Tale* is symbolized in layers of darkness, the movement of which is marked by the ominous chime of church bells. Alternatively, *Barnaby*'s revolutionary time is reflected with a light that illuminates the spectators of Barnaby's execution. This foreshadows Barnaby's eventual cognitive improvement, a partial emersion from his perpetual darkness; both parties are finally brought from darkness into light. But this [en]lightening seems to come about all at once, a deus ex machina that leads into the closing chapters. Dickens' continued references to the passage of time bely this sudden imagistic shift. Though the sun had continually advanced, Dickens' emphasizes the 'brazen' nature with which it illuminates the crowd in a span of fifteen minutes, toying with the term's variability in literal and figurative usage. Either the crowd has become a clock "made of brass" or possibly has become "shameless";[54] Dickens' terminology reinforces the abrupt change. To this end, Dickens' paralleling descriptions of the church bell and the rising sun, representations of the natural passage of time and progress, is blatantly contradicted by sudden change.

---

[53] "Darkness closed around, and then came the ringing of church bells and the distant beating of the drums of the Royal Guard, as the women sat knitting, knitting. Darkness encompassed them. Another darkness was closing in as surely…So much was closing in about the women who sat knitting, knitting, that they their very selves were closing in around a structure yet unbuilt, where they were to sit knitting, knitting, counting dropping heads" (*TTC* 143).

[54] "Brazen, n. 1, n. 3". *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, March 2025.

Dickens' contradictory insistence on the natural progression of time is conflated with sudden, even revolutionary, change in the crowd which he further complicates with the vision and obfuscation that the light of the sun allows. While the shadow that covers the gallows emphasizes the somber mood and fear of the machine, it simultaneously shares the status with Barnaby's mental condition, both being obfuscated by darkness. Barnaby is lamented for "his darkened intellect" (209) and as a result his mental condition is commingled with a morning that never comes. Thus, when given the chance to say his final words, Hugh implores the crowd to look at Barnaby, asking them to "see what he is! – Look at him" (646)! Hugh's declaration gestures to the apparency of Barnaby's mental deficiency. Hugh emotionally pleads for the crowd to spare Barnaby, given the facts of the case: that Barnaby could know no better because of his mental stature. His repeated request to visually acknowledge Barnaby begs that the crowd not only recognize Barnaby's condition, suggesting that Barnaby is an idiot while also requesting that they look at "him", the person. Hugh's speech implores the crowd to conflate Barnaby's identities and thus reach the conclusion that they cannot condemn the person for the actions of the mentally impaired entity before them. Hugh's speech emphasizes the physiological nature of Barnaby's condition which limits his agency while simultaneously requesting them to grant Barnaby personhood, a social existence that can only occur with the crowd's acknowledgement of the individual before them. Yet, the crowd's positive response to Hugh's oration is only possible because of the advancement of the sun as representative of both temporal and visible progress. The thematic use of the sun therefore makes for a troubling conflation of political and social progress, a suggestion that significant reform can be made in short time only through the threat of sovereign power.

Hugh's pathos forces the crowd to acknowledge Barnaby's concurrent personhood and innocence which necessitate a social response to his situation. The crowd cannot bring themselves

to execute an *innocent* (as the mentally impaired are referred to in Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly*). So, as Hugh and Dennis are led to the scaffold, Barnaby is restrained and instead marched to Bloomsbury, to await his own fate. In the meantime, Dickens passively describes various hangings occurring at the same moment: two cripples hung in Bloomsbury; another boy hung in Bow Street; one young man in Bishopsgate, his elderly father looking on; and finally, four women as well as an assortment of other young boys in other parts of town (649). These various hangings convey the lack of interest in the outcomes of these other so-called offenders. They are listed off nonchalantly in a manner that elevates the sentimentalism of Hugh's oration. In light of his speech, interest in Barnaby's unique situation causes the recognition of these other situations to fade in the public eye. Dickens conveys the failing memory of the public, who have seemingly forgotten the mass-hangings of the day, in favor of Barnaby's fate: "the crowd had forgotten these matters, or cared little about them if they lived in their memory: and while one great multitude fought and hustled to get near the gibbet before Newgate, for a parting look, another followed in the train of poor lost Barnaby, to swell the throng that waited for him on the spot" (649). The crowd's increased concern for Barnaby's predicament suggests a shifting understanding of his condition, but also alludes to the permeation of his impairment. While the crowd's concern for Barnaby increases, their memory of other executions dissipates.

The blending of intellectual (dis)ability between Barnaby and the masses suggests his ingratiation into society, with the caveat that he is distinctly different, and even heralded, because of his impairment. But at the same time, the hope for his habilitation permeates the periphery of the novel, with the belief that "Having sometimes glimmerings and dawnings of the light, is scarcely to be trusted as a total darkness" (377). Because Barnaby experiences occasional moments of lucidity, he balances between idiocy and normativity, and therefore between idiocy and society. Therefore, the very fact that Barnaby's intellect is, as noted prior, "darkened", rather

than simply "dark" suggests the possibility of habilitation because his condition is less severe. Because Barnaby's condition is continually conflated with the riot itself, his cognitive improvement reflects upon the unfulfilled revolution, a riot which failed to live up to its potential. He is granted personhood but never quite achieves normate status, as "a dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence, and never cleared away" (687). Just as the Gordon riots never achieve the status of 'revolution', Barnaby is never quite 'normal' even if his disability is largely mitigated. An invocation of narrative prosthesis is unavoidable here; though Barnaby continues to live, his disability becomes a non-factor, ostensibly solved by both social acceptance and inexplicable habilitation. The problems of the narrative, Barnaby's disability and the Gordon riots, dissolve by the end of the novel.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the populist Gordon riots as represented in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*. However, Dickens' criticisms of populism and riot are as relevant today as they were at the novel's publication. Both the Gordon riots and the MAGA movement exemplify the conflict inherent in the populist movement. By appealing to the broadest possible group of people, both movements created coalitions of 'the forgotten'. These groups were commonly ingratiated into the movement through fearmongering, suggestions that their privileged space in society was under threat. The rhetoric that populism uses is rather superficial and at times illogical. I argue that Dickens invokes the figure of the idiot to poke fun at those who allow themselves to be duped through populist rhetoric. By putting these rioters into proximity with Barnaby, Dickens conflates 'idiocy' with submission to populist rhetoric. These individuals, Dickens suggests, allow themselves to feel too much, and think too little.

Barnaby's eventual cognitive improvement emerges seemingly out of the blue following the riots and his attempted execution, complicating eighteenth century optimism in regeneration[55] and habilitation. Part of this complication emerges as a result of the intricate makeup of Barnaby's condition, precipitously balanced between idiocy and normalcy. The upsetting nature of his situation leaves Barnaby emotionally broken and even further intellectually stunted than prior to the violence. Dickens describes Barnaby's eventual regeneration as such:

> Some time elapsed before Barnaby got the better of the shock he had sustained, or regained his old health and gaiety. But he recovered by degrees: and although he could never separate his condemnation and escape from the idea of a terrific dream, he became, in other respects, more rational. Dating from the time of his recovery, he had a better memory and greater steadiness of purpose; but a dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence, and never cleared away. (687)

Though Barnaby never achieves what might be considered an average intellect, his eventual growth emerges seemingly without educational efforts. Somehow, he becomes "more rational", with a greater capacity for reason. Furthermore, one of the primary means by which Dickens relays Barnaby's supposed mental impairment, his memory, similarly improves. With Barnaby's apparent intellectual ascension, Dickens derides the optimism of the previous century. Barnaby's condition improves only "by degrees"; at the same time his intellect exists in a stasis for all but two pages of the novel, only to exhibit some spontaneous generation in the closing paragraphs. Still, the cognitive cloud that encircles him never fully lifts. By drawing connections between Barnaby and the Gordon Riots, Dickens interweaves the two. Just as Barnaby is never quite made into a 'perfect' human being, the riots never quite achieve the distinction of revolution. The

[55] In *A Tale,* Dickens' describes the guillotine as "the sign of the regeneration of the human race" (205), in a tongue-in-cheek manner. In both novels, such devices of execution fulfill a public desire for rapid solutions to complicated problems such as political turmoil or disability.

solutions to political problems, Dickens' novel suggests, is not in brash revolutionary violence. Such actions result only in violence, theft, arson, and rape. In essence, though the Gordon riots begin as an altruistic means of political evolution for the purpose of improving human existence, they degenerate into atavism.

As of January 22, 2025, 1500 members of the MAGA movement that assaulted the capitol have been pardoned. For most of them, the event was and is still a source of anger. Some others, however, have shifted their stance. One such participant Pamela Hemphill, nicknamed MAGA Granny, refused her pardon because it would be "an insult to the Capitol Polic officers, to the rule of law, to our nation". During and following January 6, Hemphill became disillusioned with the MAGA movement, and has since described it as "a cult", suggesting that, since she escaped "I got my critical thinking back and started doing my own research, which I'm guilty of not doing back then because they gaslight you so much…You look back and you go, what was I thinking"?[56] Populism is designed to reduce thought, to invoke feeling. The riots that resulted from each of these movements are predicated on emotion, on fear. This, in itself, does not make them senseless or apolitical. Anger is a legitimate response to politics. But populism, at least as depicted by Dickens, is a delegitimized form of public action that verges on the idiotic. For Dickens, only after one has escaped the clutches of populist rhetoric can they re-engage in some semblance of critical thought.

[56] Krutzig, Sally. "'Trying to rewrite history': Boise Woman Guilty in Capitol Riot Rejects Trump Pardon". Idaho Statesman, January 22, 2025.
https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/crime/article298937855.html

Feeble-minded Women, Sexuality, and the Politics of Care

This chapter takes a feminist approach to argue that gender is an understudied aspect of Intellectual Disability; it furthermore argues that representations of female 'feeble-mindedness' (FM), as seen in the poem "Janet Fisher" explore conflicting themes of promiscuity, community, and care. Generally, the feeble-minded individual was viewed with greater suspicion than the idiot or imbecile because of their ability to 'pass'. The threat of people who display a certain intellectual proficiency but fail to live up to the standard of Victorian 'fitness' or normalcy (in the language of modern DS), seemed an especially pernicious one, especially later in the century. This was largely due to the rise of eugenic ideology, which saw the relative invisibility of FM as a national concern, in both the U.K. and U.S. However, FM also speaks to the relativity of intelligence that this project traces. Though considered a disability, FM bridges the gap between more severe forms of intellectual disability, like idiocy and imbecility, and 'normalcy'. While intellectual disability is often coded according to gender, the fear of passing on degenerative traits, slight though this degeneration may be, became the dominant concern regarding FM women. Concerns of heredity, as my chapter on Joseph Conrad explains, typically resulted in the scapegoating of women as the progenitors of disability, and other forms of deviancy and degeneration. The firm belief in FM womens' increased sexual promiscuity reinforced such anxieties.[57] Institutionalization, rather than education, became the dominant mode of dealing with FM. The condition was deemed too dangerous, by some, to permit within social space. This chapter analyzes Agnes Mary Frances Robinson's "Janet Fisher", alongside contemporary

[57] Joyce Goodman has argued that "Edwardian feminists…concern for [the] feeble-minded woman was located in preventative work for prostitutes and closely connected with issues of women's rights". "Pedagogy and sex: Mary Dendy (1855-1933), feeble-minded girls and the Sandlebridge Schools, 1902-33." Vol. 34, No. 2, 2005, p. 172.

discourse on FM, to draw out Victorian concerns of gender and FM as they contentiously correspond with discussions of community and care.

As opposed to some of her previous works, which prioritized poetics, Robinson's *The New Arcadia and Other Poems* (1890), in which "Janet Fisher" first appears, blends her poetic talent with an increased focus on social reform. As a result, most of the entries in the collection fixate on disadvantaged individuals. "Man and Wife" is narrated by a wife and mother whose husband has lost his sight; the pair decide to leave their home to their son and live in a poorhouse, so he might have a life unburdened by his parents. "The Scapegoat" depicts a young girl whose father dies of supposed alcoholism, and whose brothers left her alone to perish in the family's dilapidated hovel. "The Rother's" narrativizes the orphaning of a young pair of siblings, after their father dies from a horse-riding accident. While *Arcadia* interests itself in the economically, bodily, and socially disadvantaged, "Janet Fisher" concentrates on the gendered and disabled vulnerability that realizes itself in female intellectual impairment during the period.

"Janet Fisher" narrates the story of an ID woman whose rural community cares for her after the death of her mother. The narration opens with a description of this sordid community, a marshy hamlet planted so far from civilization that the narrator affirms "even here there was life" (22). Following this description, the poem continues the narrative proper by describing Janet's evening walk to the riverbed where she last moored her rowboat; rowing is Janet's favorite pastime. Nearing her boat, Janet pulls back the riverside branches and discovers a man, frantically burying an article of clothing. The reader quickly discerns that this man is a deserter, concealing his uniform before absconding further from his post. Perceiving the woman standing behind him, the soldier abruptly turns, revealing his disheveled visage. Though his unkempt appearance gives Janet pause, the allure of the bright crimson coat, half-buried, compels Janet to remain. The soldier's immediate thought is to surrender, assuming Janet to be cognizant of the stakes of his

discovery. Yet, she seems unconcerned with the precariousness of his situation, instead directing her attention to the vibrant coat, verbalizing her interest with a succinct "Give me it" (110)! Not fully comprehending Janet's mental acuity and taking note of the nearby rowboat, he entreats Janet to aid in his escape. Understanding his request, and anxious to display her rowing ability, Janet acquiesces and the two set off down the river as a tempest forms overhead. Weary from his ordeal, the soldier falls asleep as Janet rows them down the river and into the sea. Finally awakening as the waves crash around them, the soldier panics as Janet cowers in the hull, crying out for him to save them. As the boat sinks, the soldier's immediate thoughts are to exact revenge upon the madwoman who led him to his demise. Ultimately, their bodies are discovered the next morning, the soldier still "clasping fast" to the village innocent (219). It is unclear if the soldier's final moments were an attempt to save or to murder Janet. As "the sad story came to light" (225), there seems to have been a genuine concern for Janet, "missed a day and night" (222), replaced with sincere sadness for her passing. Though the poem opens by flatly foreshadowing Janet's death,[58] the emotions that surface with her passing suggest greater affection for her than is let on earlier in the poem. The poem aestheticizes the socioeconomic problem of the intellectually impaired, which, by way of its narratively prostheticized elimination of the mentally impaired protagonist, also alludes to concerns for the safety of the disabled.

This essay reads the titular character of "Janet Fisher" as 'feeble-minded', rather than as the "idiot" girl it claims to represent. Though referred to as an idiot by the narrator, Janet exhibits greater mental capacity than the diagnosis confers**.** She appears capable of both labor and speech, two functions that directly influence a person's social status. Because she can labor Janet is not a

[58] The poem opens with the lines "Where Janet Fisher lived and died, / The Eastland marshes reach away / For miles on miles of either side / A river desolately wide / That is itself as drear as they" (1-5). The poem does not allude to Janet's lifespan, so while the reader goes into the narrative aware of the outcome, the specific nature of Janet's death is established as the narratorial payoff from the outset.

burden, and because she can speak her disability is more accommodated and less apparent (though not completely invisible). Janet's feeble-mindedness is inherently less of an impairment than other historical forms of ID; yet she is also less disabled because of this reciprocal labor. The community cares for Janet because this care is *not* charity. I thereby argue that 'idiocy' is used here as a broader reference to ID, but which in this case dilutes the qualities of this depiction by eschewing issues of care common in more severe cases of ID. While diagnosing fictional characters can, and has been, considered problematic by many DS scholars, the specific medico-cultural implications of feeble-mindedness compels the reader to reread iterations of intellectual disability with such concerns in mind. The purpose of this classification is to acknowledge the historical significance of the feeble-minded figure during the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially as this significance relates to gendered aspects of intellectual impairment. This is not to minimize or mitigate the significance of 'idiocy', 'imbecility', or any other nineteenth-century mental conditions, but rather to acknowledge the complications that emerge with this later diagnosis.

Feeble-mindedness stands apart from idiocy and imbecility in many ways, though the most pronounced is its relative invisibility; eugenic concerns of feeble-mindedness highlight the obscure visual quality that allows those afflicted to circumnavigate surveillance. Following in the path of Social Darwinists and eugenicists alike, Mary Dendy stands out as an especially prominent figure in such discussions. As a major proponent for the construction of the Sandlebridge boarding school in 1908, Dendy championed for the segregation of those deemed feeble-minded, arguing that "By virtue of their physical and mental proximity to the normal population could evade immediate recognition" (Qtd in Jackson 165). Sandlebridge was the first permanent residential facility for the FM in the United Kingdom and would later be renamed the Mary Dendy Hospital. Dendy focused her attention on the segregation of the feeble-minded,

rather than 'idiots' and 'imbeciles', because of an apparently increased potential to pass on degenerative qualities, arguing that it is "not the very severe cases which are the most dangerous; it is the mild cases, which are capable of being well veneered, so as to look, for a time at any rate, almost normal, against which there is most need to protect society".[59] Under the guise of protecting society, Dendy's eugenic aim targeted those most difficult to discern. I suggest that Janet fits into this description; though her community is aware of her condition, Janet's passing interaction with the soldier is predicated on his unawareness of her condition. That such individuals had 'veneered' their condition even suggests the possibility of intentional deception, reinforcing an overlap between intellectual disability and morality. Just how intellectually impaired one needed to be to be diagnosed as feeble-minded remains in doubt. For Dendy at least, understandings of social mores, especially in relation to sexuality, was a clear-cut signal of potential 'weakness of intellect'. I argue that these concerns of FM and promiscuity facilitate the complexities of Robinson's poem that are not immediately visible on the surface.

Though idiocy is most often represented through male figures, writings on feeble-mindedness seem predominantly concerned with sexuality because of the relative visual obscurity of the condition. Though not as present as their male counterparts, "representations of female 'idiots' consistently emphasize sexual or other physical appetites".[60] However, the classification of feeble-mindedness appeared far more concerning considering its ability to go unnoticed at a glance. The idea that individuals with ID are more sexually threatening seems shocking, and likely offensive, to many. There is a worthwhile discussion to be had around social mores,

---

[59] Jackson, Mark. "Institutional Provision for the Feeble-Minded in Edwardian England: Sandlebridge and the Scientific Morality of Permanent Care". *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996, p. 166.

[60] McDonagh, Patrick. "Essential Women: femininity and idiocy". *Idiocy: A Cultural History.* Liverpool University Press, 2008. P. 105.

especially as it relates to public space. Such a discussion needs to account for the realization that any 'sexual' behavior may not be deliberate; However, this discussion needs to go hand-in-hand with another important discussion regarding ID and sexuality: How does the public reconcile their discomfort with ID sexuality and the fundamental belief in sexuality as a basic human right?[61] Perhaps it is worth asking if this fundamental belief is, in fact, fundamental in everyone. The severity of impairment logically factors into this discussion, creating a case-by-case basis suggests that sex is not a privilege granted to all. However, I reject the sweeping category of 'Intellectual Disability' as a wholesale determiner of sexual rights. Intellectual Disability, as a diagnostic category, belies the breadth of experiences it constitutes.

Still, that diagnosis comes from someone, whether a potential sexual partner, parent, or caretaker. This diagnostic judgment is always passed by someone else. The variables that arise when considering mental disability and sex raise questions worthy of extensive discussion. The modern version of this discussion requires consideration of the legal implications of guardianship. Is a guardian maintaining their charge's safety if that individual is allowed to engage in sexual behavior? What sort of behavior is allowed? How much management of this situation does the guardian need to have? How much management is too much? These are questions that do not even consider a sexual partner, which naturally breeds a variety of additional complications.

Still, stereotypes of sexuality permeated and there are records of 'idiot' women who vehemently opposed any form of sexual interaction. Perhaps one of the best, or at least most amusing, of these is Marie Leblanc, a feral child discovered in Champagne in the eighteenth century, and whose baptismal name suggests the hopes of restoring her to civilized virtue. Marie had apparently survived for ten years in the forests of France, feeding on raw meat and forgeable

[61] For more on sexuality, social mores, and ID see Akdemir, Bora. "Opinions of Special Education Teachers on Inappropriate Sexual Behaviors in Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities". *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, Vol. 70, No. 4, pp. 641-650.

foods. The facts of Marie's case are not wholly agreed upon. It is likely that there are some fictive elements. Marie's age, for instance, has been a point of speculation. The dominant story of the time imagined a young Marie, raiding an apple orchard wearing nothing but rags, brandishing a wooden club. The prevailing belief at the time was that she lived with wolves, though there is also speculation suggesting it was more likely that she fended them off using her bludgeon. Other sources suggest that she originated in Canada and washed ashore during an Atlantic crossing. After her discovery, various attempts at domestic cultivation and education were made. These attempts were relatively successful, at least in comparison to some of the other 'feral children' throughout history. Gaining global notoriety as "The Wild Girl of Champaigne", amidst other monikers, Marie became a source of intellectual curiosity and scientific inquiry. Despite her 'idiocy', at least as it accords to a lack of education, "It appears that Marie-Angélique dreaded being touched, especially by the opposite sex: she reportedly emitted piercing screams when men came too close. On one occasion she responded to unwanted contact by striking and temporarily blinding a man with a piece of raw beef; on another she nearly strangled an overly friendly soldier".[62] While concerns of ID women's sexuality have proliferated throughout the centuries, Leblanc provides one rather evocative example of a firm aversion to physical contact. Pamela Cox points to the numerous reasons that a girl might be institutionalized, or 'certified', writing: "The subject of girls and mental deficiency is generally discussed in terms of sexual degeneracy, waywardness and illegitimacy. However, girls were also certified because they were considered to be violent, disruptive and unemployable".[63] So, while the reasons for diagnoses vary, the general function of these diagnoses is the removal of afflicted individuals from the public sphere. In

[62] Douthwaite, p. 39.
[63] Cox, Pamela. "Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency". *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996, p. 185.

Robinson's poem, Janet provides an opportunity for readers to embrace Janet's value because of her innocence. Her benevolent intentions ultimately lead to her and the soldier's demise, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to blame her for the outcome.

While many Victorians held a concern for the sexuality of feeble-minded women, some writers countered such notions in their representations. Patrick McDonagh, for instance, has pointed to George Eliot's novel *Romola* (1862-3) as one such iteration, arguing that Victorian feminist writers, especially, would use the intellectually impaired woman "to embody sexual exploitation, or the threat of it".[64] McDonagh looks at *Romola*'s Tessa, an apparent "simpleton" who perceives herself to be married to the vindictive Tito Melema, and even bears his child. Tessa, of course, appears to be utilized in this instance as a foil for the titular heroine's own "trusting simplicity". McDonagh continues by looking at other feminist writers, such as Charlotte Brontë and Margaret Oliphant, who shift the focus from rampant sexuality to sexual vulnerability (124). Robinson, similarly, pushes against this depreciative view by pushing her titular character into contemporarily understood dissolute waters, while maintaining that Janet's physical and sexual safety are the ultimate concern. Robinson's poem captures the complexity of contemporary views on women and FM: Janet is a sexual threat chiefly because of her sexual vulnerability.

FM Women, Sex, and Ignorant Immorality

The meeting between Janet Fisher and the soldier echoes with sexual tension because of the sociohistorical context into which the poem is written. While there is certainly tension in the poem, this is reflected in the danger of the storm, into which Janet rows herself and her companion. The sense of impending doom becomes apparent to the reader midway through the

[64] McDonagh, Patrick. "Essential Women: femininity and idiocy". *Idiocy: A Cultural History.* Liverpool University Press, 2008, p. 123.

poem, shortly after the boat is unmoored from the shore and the two are left alone together; the tension emerges from omniscience granted to the reader, but which is withheld from Janet, likely due to her condition. As the clouds darken overhead, foreshadowing the storm that will eventually capsize our subjects, Janet's condition, as well as the exhilaration of the experience, disables her from seeing the danger, as "Janet felt no thrill of dread" (145). Janet's thrill, the exhilaration conveyed throughout this section, is plainly not one of dread or terror, though the poem neglects to outright explain what stimuli does produce the response. Part of this thrill is clearly manifested through Janet's pride, her child-like desire to show the soldier how well she can row. She desires to perform her ability for him. Invoking the pride of a toddler who has learned a new skill, Janet "longed to show him how well she rowed" (135). While this "longing" is immediately read as merely the longing to prove oneself in a certain vocation, the desirous language continues throughout the poem, invoking potentially erotic themes that envelope the pairings' relationship. With this understanding, an underlying form of tension in the narrative materializes. Important to this discussion is the readerly awareness of Janet's intellectual impairment to which the soldier is not privy. As a result, their isolation upon shoving off becomes immediately apparent to the reader. Ultimately, the poem finds itself wedged between concerns for Janet's safety, while also toying with the notion of her own sexuality expressed through her interest in this stranger.

The scene in which Janet discovers the soldier reinforces the erotic tension that pervades throughout the rest of the poem. The second part of the poem, following Robinson's description of Janet's community and her place within it, sees Janet ambling to her moored boat. Pulling back the reeds, she discovered "A man, half-stripped, beside the boat, / Burying hurriedly underground / And heaping yellow leaves around / A stained and faded soldier's coat" (102-105). Janet is immediately drawn to his coat, despite its discolored and worn condition. Granting a brief insight into Janet's mind, the poem refers to the "splendor of the scarlet cloth" (109); that which the

poem describes as stained and faded is, in Janet's mind, a fabric of fair make. Of note, Janet is interested in the coat itself, rather than the soldier. The coat's stain could be a gesture toward national dishonor, given the soldier's desertion, however the continued sensual language surrounding these characters allows for an alternative, or additional, reading in which the soldier's sexuality is amplified. Soldiers in nineteenth-century literature retain a notorious reputation for rampant sexuality,[65] as can be most notably seen with George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), who notoriously absconds with Jane's sister Lydia, so the two may marry. Of course, Wickham's character eventually comes to light with the discovery of his numerous debts and schemes throughout the novel's plot. Because of this familiar trope, Janet's isolated interaction with the soldier raises concerns for questions of feminine decorum, despite her apparent disinterest in the soldier. Janet's nonsexual sentiments in this moment push against contemporary perceptions of feeble-minded women, who were often attributed with a form of immorality equated to "moral imbecility". So, when the soldier "wished her, prayed her, to remain",[66] this can most simply be read as a request to aid in his escape. Because of her relative impairment, the soldier is unable to recognize Janet's condition. He therefore sees her as someone capable of aiding him. Furthermore, his wishing and praying continues a theme of yearning. The favor to which Janet acquiesces leads the two to untie the boat and seek flight via the nearby river.

When Janet begins rowing the exhausted soldier to safety, the undulating waves and isolation of the river creates potential for an erotic reading of the scene. Of course, readers familiar with George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860) may recognize a pervading theme running

[65] For more on British soldiers and sexuality, see Chauhan, Sameera. "Managing Sex, Safeguarding the Soldier: Gender, Race, and Regulationism in Nineteenth Century Colonial Punjab". *Feminist Encounters*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2024, pp. 1-18.
[66] Robinson, p. 129.

through Robinson's poem. In a similar scene the protagonist of Eliot's novel, Maggie, boards a rowboat with Stephen Guest and the two drift down the river Floss. Yet, the pair quickly lose track of how far they travel, and upon reuniting with her brother Tom, Maggie is surprised at his dismay. The excursion stains Maggie's reputation in her community, an indication of her perceived immodest behavior. In a similar vein, Janet's excursion with the soldier speaks to the potential eroticism of this isolated moment. Driving this point home, Robinson emphasizes the movement of the waves and the sound of the gale, as "The river heaved in waves; and soughs / And moans of wind began to arouse / The storm" (168-70). Robinson's use of sexually coded language, with surrounding elements heaving and moaning, culminating in the climactic storm, metaphorizes the scene. Pushing this metaphor forward, as the boat rocks upon the river, water sprays over the bow and "the wave / That drenched her dress" (192-3). Soaking Janet's dress, the narrative highlights the vulgarity of the scene, unrestrained in its representation.

The sexual vulnerability of Victorian women has been discussed by a variety of literary scholars, perhaps most notably Shani D'Cruze in *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women* (1998); but this discussion has not generally taken the issue of intellectual impairment into account. This is not especially surprising, as even modern studies of intellectual abuse find it difficult to accurately convey the extent of the issue. This is not for lack of study in the area, but rather is the result of challenges involved with capturing the magnitude of such a taboo topic. Tharinger et al. point out that assailants are more likely to be caregivers, family members, or other individuals that the victim knows and likely trusts.[67] As a result, the victim is less likely, either due to coercion or fear, to report the issue. Tharinger acknowledges the inherent challenges of performing such a study by alluding to the various reasons for under-reporting,

[67] Tharinger, Deborah, Connie Horton and Susan Millea. "Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children and Adults with Mental Retardation and other Handicaps" *Child Abuse & Neglect,* Vol. 14, 1990, p. 304, 306

namely: “difficulties communicating, not knowing who to tell, feeling guilty and responsible, being coerced, fearing that they won’t be believed, and the willingness to put up with the abuse in order to be liked, to feel normal, or to receive rewards. In addition, the sexual abuse may be on top of psychological abuse and neglect” (307). It should not surprise the reader that many of the reasons for sexual assault in these cases are similar to cases against other non-impaired people. Still, the increased vulnerability against the intellectually impaired is often associated with the very nature of their impairment: the victim must *know* that what is being done to them is wrong. Historically, victims with ID were often coaxed or manipulated into sexual acts because of a “weakness of will-power” which made them “do anything that they are told”.[68] The ID individual’s increased compliance, which Victorians saw as a weakness of will, was as a threat despite the inherent passivity traced in these arguments.[69] Janet, already entranced by the vibrancy of the soldier’s coat, is easily persuaded because of the kind manner with which the soldier treats her, a far cry from the usual brutishness of her neighbors: “She smiled. Her masters on the fen / Bade her: Do this, bear such a load, / Go there—for they were brutish men. / But this man spake her fair; and then / She longed to show him how well she rowed” (131-135). Social pliability, which some sexual predators used to their own advantage, was considered a reflection of the ID person’s morality. In Janet’s case, she showcases a sense of pride in an ability, the “one thing…she could do well” (130). Mixed into this overarching narrative of promiscuity and morality is a more simple and charming story of dignity. Furthermore, as I will explore in the second part of this chapter, the community of which Janet is partly ensconced is also responsible for Janet’s ‘seduction’. Having experienced only callousness, Janet is easily seduced with a kind

---

[68] Quoted on Goodman, Joyce. “Pedagogy and sex: Mary Dendy (1855-1933), feeble-minded girls and the Sandlebridge Schools, 1902-33.” Vol. 34, No. 2, 2005, p. 174.
[69] For more on ID women and sexual vulnerability, see Block, Pamela. “Sexuality, Fertility, and Danger: Twentieth-Century Images of Women with Cognitive Disabilities”. *Sexuality and Disability*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2000, pp. 239-254.

word. Still, there is a reality of sexual violence to which Robinson's poem points. Unable to recognize right or wrong Janet, and those with similar conditions, could be easily manipulated into unsafe circumstances, and be chastised by a hypocritical society for their inherent ignorance.

The FM woman's tractability was most commonly considered a willfulness toward seduction. Victorians perceived such women to be "easily seduced" due to a lack of willpower, an inability to control one's own inner desires.[70] However, their apparent ease of seduction was likely due to their inability to recognize the unethical behavior of their assailant. Individuals such as Mary Dendy, however, would invert this rhetoric, arguing that it is the feeble-minded girl who is exhibiting elements of moral imbecility, a lack of awareness of social mores, of right and wrong according to the established tradition. Jan Walmsley's discourse on the mental deficiency act of 1913 bridges Dendy's writings with various studies of supposedly feeble-minded women, two of which stand out for their especially promiscuous behavior. After examination, a Deputy County Medical Officer of Health reported that one of them, Emily, "admitted to immoral relations with soldiers, but 'did not appreciate its immorality'" (67). She was thus believed to be a 'moral imbecile', in that though she admitted to "immoral relations with soldiers" she "did not appreciate its immorality" (67). That this instance involves a soldier is, at the very least, coincidental. To this end, the second case study which Walmsley pursues examines Dorothy, who "waved at passing soldiers and blew them kisses". While Emily was outright declared a 'moral imbecile', Dorothy's diagnosis is unclear. Likely, the girls share a diagnosis, considering that "there was no reference to her [Deborah's] intellectual capacity in his [The Deputy County Medical Officer of Health's] report, merely her moral sense". Walmsley's essay perpetuates this discussion, laying out a variety of early twentieth studies that speak to the growing concern over

[70] See Goodman, p. 174.

the parallel of intellectual 'deficiency' and sexual promiscuity among women.[71] The growing restlessness with feeble-mindedness would result in the passage of the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, an act that would concentrate nationalist eugenic concerns and perpetuate these anxieties well into the next century.

Increasingly concerned citizens regarded FM, and the illegitimate children FM women would birth, as impediments to national prosperity during the nineteenth century. In one workhouse, Dendy notes that: "there have been during the last three years amongst the mothers of illegitimate children 16 who were of weak intellect…In one house to which I went to inquire for a feeble-minded boy I found also his sister, a woman 35 years of age, of weak intellect and deaf, nursing her third illegitimate child".[72] Though mentioning a boy in this instance, Dendy quickly turns her attention to his sister, remarking on the continued trend of young mentally impaired mothers. Though periodically sympathetic with these individuals, Dendy's discussion blatantly veers into the eugenic when she writes that "The life of girls such as these is pitiable in the extreme. Year after year they return to the workhouse to bear children, many of whom fortunately die but some of whom live to repeat their mother's experience" (1462). Dendy ominously considers the fortuitous death ratios of these women while also alluding to the inheritance of disability from their mothers, who the reader assumes were also impaired.

Sexual concerns dominate many of these contemporary discussions of feeble-mindedness which signals a departure from broader discussions of idiocy. Of course, this is partly due to the socio-political nature of the eugenic movement, however there is also some evidence that instances of more severe intellectual impairment simply elicit less sexual behaviors, as suggested

---

[71] See Walmsley "Women and the Mental Deficiency Aft of 1913: Citizenship, Sexuality and Regulation". *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*. Vol. 28, p. 67. Walmsley discusses a study conducted by Bedfordshire Mental Deficiency Committee from 1916-1918 that found "out of 15 girls and young women detained in institutions…11 were described as displaying inappropriate sexual behaviour".
[72] Dendy, Mary. "The Feeble-Minded and Crime". *The Lancet,* 1902, p. 1462.

by Peter Rushton, who writes: "Interestingly, there are no accounts of a dangerously uncontrolled sexual appetite associated with idiocy, even among mature and adult victims. Some literary images seem to dwell on the possibility of enhanced sexual appetite among 'fools', but one legal authority felt that the capacity to have (actually to 'beget') children was proof of normality rather than idiocy".[73] The question of animal instinct is called, at least in this instance, into question. While instances of sex, pregnancy, and motherhood amongst the intellectually impaired Victorian woman undoubtedly occurred, the rampancy of these occurrences has been called into question. David Wright also suggests that "it must be emphasised that these references are very rare indeed and the prevalence of sex and sexuality as an indicator of mental handicap shows little of the predominance that they acquire amongst the Edwardian intelligentsia".[74] The more important question, when it comes to sexuality in these cases, was the question of consent.

This project will not attempt to draw a moralistic stance on the discussion of ID and sex but is instead interested in revealing the extent to which the idea of intellectual impairment is allowed to engage with the facts of human life. The notion of consensual sex amongst the intellectually impaired remains a taboo subject to this day, despite the innate argument that this discomfort suggests: that the intellectually disabled person is, in fact, less of a person. Erving Goffman's conceptualization of stigma is immediately evoked in this conversation. I admit that I never thought of my own brother's sexuality, considering the severity of his condition and his inability to communicate due to his non-verbal nature. Still, I advocate against the flattening of sexual liberties based on a perception of ID as a static biological category. Such flattening would

---

[73] Rushton, Peter. "Idiocy, the Family and the Community in Early modern North-East England". *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996, p. 51.
[74] Wright, David. "Childlike in His Innocence: Lay Attitudes to 'Idiots' and 'Imbeciles' in Victorian England". *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996, p. 126.

merely be additional evidence of the socially disabling nature of ID. Different people diagnosed with ID have different experiences of reality; that experiential difference possibly necessitates some level of outside intervention, whether from family members or institutions, in determining the appropriateness of the person's relationship. Uncomfortably, this does suggest that other people with less severe forms of ID are granted more personhood, or at least more rights, than individuals like my brother. While I am uncomfortable with that sentiment, I acknowledge Zach's limited social function is a reality of the specific form of his condition. He does not realize he has rights.

Communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, is required to provide consent, but this fact leads down two paths of biopolitical significance, both of which infantilize the individual with an ID. If the individual is judged to be incapable of providing consent, they outright lose the privilege of doing so. This individual loses legal status because of the perception that they have a reduced capacity to convey agency. This is, of course, under the pretense of protecting the individual who is, for whatever reason, unable to consent. But the removal of those natural rights is socially and culturally enforced—socially deconstructing (or disabling) intellectual impairment so it aligns with modern social norms. Alternatively, if an individual with a milder form of intellectual impairment provides consent, that consent is likely filtered through a third party, like family or medical professionals. This person's status as an individual is *still* diminished. This infantilization of ID seems an inevitable byproduct of sexual norms. The interpersonal nature of sex makes it a challenging topic, since ID is always being interpreted and adjudicated by another person. This debate is beyond the purvey of this chapter; so, rather than offer any distinctive answer to this thread, at the very least it is worth pointing out that disallowing such a topic to become mainstream discourse simply reinforces the disabling of intellectual impaired individuals. Whether this topic is morally suitable or not remains an ongoing discussion, in certain circles; yet

those circles are relatively niche. Of course, despite the idea of intellectual disability and sexual acts being a taboo pairing, this does not mean that such discourse is non-existent. But most research has instead prioritized the power dynamics that lead to powerlessness that such individuals might face, especially as it relates to intercourse.

This chapter is primarily interested in the concept of feeble-mindedness as it correlates to the treatment of women, but it is worth considering, for a moment, the manner with which FM and men's sexuality has been considered in the past. Most notably, Michel Foucault's discussion of the Lapcourt, or 'curdled milk' incident, from *The History of Sexuality* is worth parsing here. Foucault describes the 1867 incident in which a "somewhat simple-minded" farmhand, Charles Jouy, approached two girls, both aged 11, and received "a few caresses" from Sophia Adam, through a game called 'curdled milk' the children often played with each other. Noting Jouy's perceived sexual abuse of Adam, her parents had him arrested, at which point he underwent a regimen of criminalization and medicalization, before being shut away in a hospital at Maréville for the rest of his life. Foucault's analysis of the incident is infamous for its cavalier attitude; undoubtedly, the manner with which he discusses the village's reaction to Jouy's actions, the "pettiness of it all" (31), amplified criticisms of the scholar's sexual politics. While I fervently disagree with Foucault's 'petty' description, I do acknowledge the chilling extensiveness of this social response. Foucault narrates the erasure of this individual from Lapcourt; he is removed from the village and then deliberately forgotten, spoken of no more (32). I consider this aspect of the story particularly troubling, as it reinforces the unspokenness of ID and sexuality which continues today, and which results in a lack of critical engagement with this intersection of social constructions. Having survived, similarly to Janet, by exchanging his labor for room and board with the people of this community, this sudden detection of ID and sex gives cause for the purging of "degenerescence" (31), the exclusion of "this personage who up to that moment had

been an integral part of village life". It is obvious that Foucault's narration is designed to invoke sympathy for Jouy, and Feminist scholars have correctly pointed out Foucault's careless dismissal of the adult-child power dynamics.[75] Furthermore, Foucault tells this story across his lectures and writings, and the facts change across tellings. While feminist responses have criticized Foucault's flippant engagement with this incident, I find that the medical and social testimonies surrounding Jouy's behavior and mental capacity complicate what would be an otherwise straightforward instance of sexual assault.

I posit that an immediate and unwavering condemnation of Jouy's actions ignores the intersectional complexity of disability and women's, girl's, and children's rights in this incident. The medico-social testimony, provided by Drs. Henry Bonnet and Jules Bulard, provides some insight into the contemporary views of the incident. Firstly, I think it important to note a troubling sense of blame placed on Sophie Adam, considering her age. While I think it pertinent to ask just how aware this entire community is of Jouy's intellectual capacity, considering how far Jouy had been accommodated up to this point, some of the responses from community members' reveals a pervasive condemnation of perceived girls' sexuality. The first man that Adam and her young friend inform tells the pair "they were two little beasts". In his own testimony, the Mayor of Lapcourt claimed that "she takes her behavior too lightly, she hides none of her guilty actions which can unfortunately spread by example". The doctors also acknowledge Jouy's apparent inability to distinguish from right and wrong, though they do so in an infantilizing manner, offering that "we find him childish, without moral consistency" and claiming that "his moral sense is in its infancy"; they also write that "it is reported that he had enough understanding to discern right from wrong".[76] The continued efforts to compare Jouy's understanding of morality

[75] See Tremain, Shelley. "Educating Jouy". *Hypatia*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2013, pp. 801-817.
[76] Taylor, Chloë. "Medical Legal Report on the Mental State of Charles-Joseph Jouy Accused of Indecent Assaults". *Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes: An Anti-Carceral Analysis,* 2018, p. 247.

to that of a child rhetorically situate Jouy on the same intellectual and moral footing as Adam. The testimony provides insight into the stigmatized treatment of Jouy. His education was limited because "they [the school] didn't want to keep me"; he appears to have no social life, saying the "other boys" "didn't want me"; he has no relationships with women his own age because "they make fun of him", when he made advances. Jouy's social space is clearly liminal, existing somewhere between childhood and adulthood. This information does not legitimize Jouy's actions. However, Drs. Bonnet and Bulard conclude that Jouy's congenital impairment and illegitimacy caused his current state. His orphanage, in particular, limited his opportunities for education and opportunities to be "put in contact with the general principles of natural and civil law" (252). Having no "positive examples to imitate before his eyes" (253), Jouy repeated the behaviors that he saw amongst the children, unaware that his behavior would be considered inappropriate to the point of taboo. Because of his "semi-imbecile" diagnosis, the doctors suggest Jouy be exonerated; but this exoneration goes hand in hand with the prescription of institutionalization (254). Both Foucault's narrative and Robinson's poem point to the gendered power dynamics involved in a discussion of ID and sexuality. But Robinson's poem asks the pertinent question that Foucault's discussion eschews: where was the community during this game of 'curdled milk'? The testimony reveals that Jouy's sexual behaviors were not unknown to the public; it also offers a moralistic stance on the community itself, claiming that "It would seem that in Lupcourt [sic], morals are quite relaxed among the children and young people", pointing to the 'curdled milk' game the kids and teenagers play. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this entire account is the way that, despite being an 11-year-old girl, Sophie Adam is thoroughly verbally tarnished by her parents and community. In fact, "the population of Lupcourt adamantly wished to have the little Adam girl locked up in a house of correction until she came of age"

(248). The manner with which sexual abuse is flipped onto the child is shocking, while also unsurprising considering the historically gendered politics of sex.

The contentious correlation between ID and consent deserves more academic and public attention. Several modern studies have investigated the variables involved in consensual sex between impaired individuals, exemplifying the complexity of the topic. This has remained a taboo subject for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the individualistic view of disability. This viewpoint posits that no two experiences of impairment are the same and thus cannot, or should not, be treated the same. In other words, consent suggests that two individuals agree that they are experiencing relatively similar planes of mental existence. However, such modes of experience are unable to be quantified with any specificity. Still, Baines et al. suggest that this discomfort with consensual sex between intellectually impaired individuals reflects "social stigma and residual infantilising attitudes".[77] Notions of consent are especially complicated when it comes to ID, considering the variety of forms the condition can take. The severity of the condition necessarily reconfigures the capacity for consent. Some individuals might be considered more capable of providing consent, as opposed to those whose cognitive function limits the ability to recognize social, legal, or health-based issues related to the act of sex. However, their findings are helpful in comparing contemporary views of sex with that of the Victorian period. In their study, Baines et al. found that young intellectually disabled persons were more likely than their normate peers to have unsafe sex, become pregnant, and become mothers (6). The unspoken quality of sex is a recurring point of issue in this discussion and the

[77] Baines, Susannah, Eric Emerson, Janet Robertson, and Chris Hatton. "Sexual activity and sexual health among young adults with and without mild/moderate intellectual disability". *Public Health*, Vol. 18, No. 667, 2018, p 1.

lack of comprehensive sexual education, Roden argues, is intrinsically related to historical means of controlling the reproduction of deficient bodies.[78]

Some scholars, myself included, take this preponderance of research to argue that sexual education is a necessary solution to combat health risks related to unsafe sex in the ID community. Roden et al. point out that women with ID are more likely to have "negative outcomes" in their pregnancy, such as greater risk of pre-eclampsia and a lower infant birthweight than women without ID.[79] Despite its obvious health benefits, sexual education for people with ID remains a taboo subject. Part of this lack of engagement comes from the pervasive and "incorrect beliefs that people with these disabilities are either without sexual desires or unable to control their libido" (700). The ethical blurriness of this behavior is partly the result of a lack of open discourse. Sexual education in the U.S. is a fraught enough topic, and the idea of training individuals with ID how to have safe sex is, for some, is the same as teaching individuals how to have sex. Sexual rights and ID remain a troublingly taboo subject, despite ample evidence suggesting the negative consequences of ID and sexual ignorance. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) claims that the loss of sexual rights has affected ID individuals "in gender identity, friendships, self-esteem, body image and awareness, emotional growth, and social behavior". [80] The reality is that a person with ID is still a person with intersectional modes of being; this is not a question limited to a small subsection of the world's population: this is a human rights question. But it is also a question with which society chooses not to engage. The choice to disengage with this question exemplifies the lack of

---

[78] Roden, Rosemary Claire, Elizabeth Koss Schmidt, and Cynthia Holland-Hall. "Sexual health education for adolescents and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities: recommendations for accessible sexual and reproductive health information". *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, Vol. 4, No. 9, p. 700.
[79] Roden, p. 701.
[80] "*Joint Position Statement of AAIDD and The Arc"*. AAIDD, 2013, https://www.aaidd.org/news-policy/policy/position-statements/sexuality.

consensus on the topic. Though there is general agreement in the belief that sex is a basic human right, this right does not extend to all people with ID. I admit that the implications of this logic are uncomfortable; if individuals with ID are withheld certain liberties, their very personhood comes into question.

Current discourse on instances of consensual sex, to a certain extent, bears some similarities to Victorian notions; the prevailing idea is that it is remarkably difficult to ascertain the extent to which such an individual can provide consent. A recent study on girls with mild to moderate intellectual impairments concluded that they were "significantly less likely" to have [consensual] sex before the age of 16 than their male counterparts.[81] While Victorians were often concerned with ideas of inherent "animal passion",[82] Benedet et al. also point to a history of law and research that support overarching sentiments that find the intellectually disabled to be seen as animalistic, rather than childish.[83] While Victorian views were reliant on relatively recently published evolutionary theory, the view of the intellectually disabled person as a divergence from the 'thinking animal' seems not to have advanced since this period.

"Janet Fisher" creates a sequence of relationships that ultimately reveal the precarity of the FM woman's place in nineteenth-century England. The community of which Janet is a part is integral in both maintaining her safety and causing her death. Janet's particular community sees a relative value in her, however. While she exists among them, she is never quite considered one of them. The opening of the poem situates Janet as a charity case, nightly ambling from house to house to be cared for in turn. Sure, she labors for her keep, but I opine that the reciprocity of this exchange is largely lost on her neighbors. Robinson's poem belies this communal relationship

[81] Baines, p. 6.
[82] Qtd. On Goodman 175.
[83] Benedet, Janine and Isabel Grant. "Sexual Assault and the Meaning of Power and Authority for Women with Mental Disabilities". *Feminist Legal Studies,* Vol. 22, 2014, p. 138.

with a moral imperative. By opening the poem with a lengthy description of the inhabitants' willfully immoral qualities and pastimes, Robinson provides the community with a clear means of elevating themselves in the face of degrading circumstances. The narrator does not just tell the story of a FM woman's death; it tells the story of a community that loses their "one fair sight in foulest place" (52). Janet, it appears, is far more than the outsider that the community sees her as. Instead, Robinson portrays the moralistic value that the FM person provides to those around them. In a way, Janet appears to be a far more organic member of this community than Robinson's poem initially lets on.

This chapter focalizes its argument in the contradictory rhetorical space between the FM woman as sexually threatening and (sexually) vulnerable. I want to continue my analysis by addressing Robinson's portrayal of community, morality, and affect. The way in which Janet is allowed not only space within this community, but provides value as both labor and moral trial; not only does Janet work, but as "the village innocent" (50) she holds status as the solitary individual in the community who is both unable to sin and who requires others to perform acts of relative morality, to wash away sins of their own making.

Care, Community, and FM Vulnerability

Without a family or any other form of direct care, Janet subsists because of an interplay between labor and morality in which she provides different forms of value, thereby earning her keep. Though she is generally ignored by the townsfolk, they take her in following the death of her mother, as her father is no longer present, and she is frequently moved between households, in a communal form of care. There is a prevailing irony in Robinson's hypothetical construction, to which this chapter is drawn. Janet is an innocent individual but is viewed with intense suspicion because of her supposed sexuality. Yet, in their failure to keep this vulnerable person from harm,

her neighbors perform their own morally degraded qualities. Their willful failure to keep Janet safe speaks to a further moral descent. I offer this reading: Robinson constructs this hamlet, its surrounding environment, and its denizens as examples of extensive moral degradation; yet she provides these people with one person, a signal of pure innocence and vulnerability, to allow these people to be better than they are, to elevate them from their morally degenerated status. They fail this test of Victorian sensibility. This is not necessarily a condemnation of the form of care, which is predicated on a reciprocity of labor and care, rather than an altruistic, state-driven, 'top-down' form of care common in many countries. Instead, this failure is emblematic of contemporary anxieties of FM, especially FM women. It is worth asking if the community, though clearly affected by Janet's passing, is also not slightly relieved. Janet, as a hereditary threat, is removed by the end of the narrative. In eugenic views, Janet's passing might keep the community from propagating further 'degenerate' types, but it also removes their most obvious chance at demonstrating moral decency.

Janet's care is perpetuated through an exchange of labor and services that increases its economic feasibility, but which also demonstrates the moral quandary of the time. While its inhabitants board Janet, these nightly boardings are exchanged for her labor; it is not charity. So, though Janet is permitted to be amongst these people, to "live in turn with each" (63), "there was no heart to brood / Upon the irremediable ill" (59-60). Janet's neighbors require compensation for Janet's continuation within their shared space. Amongst these kin, no heart offers the minute comfort of a prayer or thought toward Janet, the most vulnerable bodymind in this community. To be sure, Janet would be lost without this form of reciprocal communal care, and there is no legal imperative that mandates the community care for local unhoused ID people. Still, the circumstances seem to work out for everyone, until the events of the poem's narrative, of course. With the end of the poem, Robinson appears to argue that this indirect form of care fails. Janet,

left to her own wanderings, meanders into (sexual) danger after (environmental) danger, ultimately leading to her death. Because she is their one good thing, Janet's death resonates as an ominous indication of the community's failure. Janet is tied to this community because of the moral and labor value that she provides, nothing more. Yet, her death seems to strike a tone with those she leaves behind. There is a marked sadness upon the realization of her drowning, despite the community's relative apathy throughout the rest of the poem. The specific cause of this sadness, however, is not clear.

Janet's community exhibits immoral behaviors that suggest rampant 'degeneracy'; this makes Janet's place amongst them logical, as eugenic ideology of the time might connect moral deviancy and 'idiocy' as two forms of degeneracy.[84] The poem opens with a description of the degraded rural community in which Janet lives. The community, though described in morally degenerated terms, is also depicted as a somewhat cohesive group in which "Few friends were there, tho' all were kin" (41). The possibility of incest seems likely in this language. Beyond that, Robinson's language conveys the immoral solidarity of the group, noting that amongst this "soulless herd" (46) lives the intellectually disabled Janet, similarly described with an "incommunicable / Dim soul" (127-128). However, while the dimness of Janet's soul comes from her condition, Robinson insinuates no such caveat for the other townspeople. Instead, their soullessness becomes immoral action, blending degenerated instinct with biblical sin: "Save sloth and lust, no joys; each year / They served their senses less in fear, / And more like beasts and viler

[84] Later eugenic idealogues would likely take Robinson's depiction to heart, considering its representation of a 'chiaroscuro' image of degeneration. In 1914 Dr. E.E. Southard, Director of the Psychopathic Hospital in Boston, spoke optimistically of new modes (such as the Alfred Binet IQ test) of gauging intelligence, offering the view that "statistical inquiries seem to justify the idea of a *chiaroscuro* of distribution" (783). This, he argued, meant that society was not wholly degenerating, but that pockets of degeneration could be geographically detected, allowing the strategic allocation of preventative work (783).[84] Southard, undoubtedly, would read Robinson's community as one such site of interest. Still, the apparent isolation of this community serves it well as it is only when an outside influence, the deserting soldier, arrives that the community's ecosystem is brought out of balance.

grew" (38-40). Robinson's narrative portrays this group of people apart from the morally uplifted behaviors that naturally befit those living in the heart of civilization. Janet's community, experiencing little day-to-day enjoyment, reverts to scriptural licentiousness. Sin, be it sloth or lust, provides what little form of daily pleasure this group can experience. Though suggesting numerous forms of sin, Robinson accentuates sexual deviancy, suggesting this as a dominant aspect of moral failure. Yet this sexual attention is not directed toward Janet. In fact, though Janet walks the streets, "No man stirred…To harm the village innocent" (48-50). Janet stands out in this community, however, because of the stigmatic monikers affixed to her. Though allowed space within the community, deserving of the services and protection that such membership provides, she is not a member of the community. The proximity that Janet's bodymind is allowed in this role situates her in a liminal space between citizenship and chattel. She might work to earn board with a different family each night, but she is also kept at a distance for fear of her particular brand of degeneracy. The first line of the narrative situates Janet's community as the space "where Janet lived and died", establishing both her nascence and mortality in the same breath. Yet, it becomes apparent that her death, if it does indeed occur by the end of the narrative, is likely not the result of misconduct at the hands of her neighbors. However, her community clearly fails to keep the young woman from harm.

I argue that Robinson's invocation of the feeble-minded woman rails against the inherent moral contradiction in Victorian eugenic ideology. Early in the poem, Janet is known as "an idiot born", while also somehow being "This one fair sight in foulest place" (51, 52). Robinson's imagined community is constructed around such contrasts. The alliterative juxtaposition of Janet's 'fairness' with the 'foulness' of her environment suggests degrees of decency or propriety, at the pinnacle of which Janet takes her place. Though housing degenerative intellectual qualities that many saw as reason for concern, Janet simultaneously functions as a beacon of innocence,

unaffected by the deliberate sins of her neighbors. She genuinely appears to be the "village innocent", in multiple senses. 'Innocent' was common enough language in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with regard to individuals "deficient in intelligence or sense".[85] Davie Gellatley, of Sir Walter Scott's *Wavery* (1814), also bears such an explicit moniker; this is significant also for the manner in which Gellatley is brought into and cared for by a community of non-relatives. The multiple ways in which the reader can read this term, either as "childlike" or, alternatively, as "free from moral wrong, sin, or guilt" challenges the supposed simplicity of Janet's tale.[86] Because of their inability to recognize, due to either childlike naivete or an obliviousness of immoral behavior which could be directed toward them, the figure of the innocent requires a level of communal care. Janet's innocence is a threat. But her sexuality, if she has any, is unapparent in Robinson's narration. So, while her neighbors actively engage in various forms of sinful behavior, Janet appears to not have engaged in such activities that might have otherwise corrupted her sensibilities. Her discovery of the soldier, and her fascination with his coat as opposed to the half-dressed man, elides any semblance of sexuality. But, while functioning as a hereditarily sexual threat, she also functions as an object of moral consideration for her neighbors.

Robinson's invocation of the term "innocent" requires a double reading of Janet as both intellectually deficient and morally unaffected. This double reading might immediately incur an understanding of the idiot as an asexual figure: a childlike figure untainted by sins of the flesh. Such language turns out to be contradictory or coincidental in Robinson's case. In fact, popular understandings of female idiocy prioritized concerns of animal instinct, behaviors that might lie

[85] See "Innocent, n.7." *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, July 2023. The *OED* describes an 'innocent' as "having or showing the simplicity, ignorance, artlessness, or unsuspecting nature of a child or one ignorant of the world".
[86] Ibid, n. 1.

latent within, but could be intensified through environmental factors. Mary Dendy's "The Feeble-Minded and Crime", argues for this imitative quality as it pertains to immorality and criminality, claiming that "The more amenable they [the Feeble-minded] have been to good influences the more readily they will succumb to bad ones. They lack will-power, and this must be superimposed from without; if it be a power for good all is well, if for evil, as it generally is, the result is disastrous" (Dendy, "Crime" 1460). Dendy's writing points specifically to the potentiality of imitation, in both positive and negative terms, though Dendy's writings repeatedly refer to "evil" in this context. She does not appear to discern between "good" and "bad" influences, but points more toward the feeble-minded figure's lack of will-power as the larger issue. Their innate inability to discern between moral and immoral signifies an apathy toward social mores. Janet's feeble-mindedness suggests increased compliance. So, despite her ostensibly moral merits, Janet can be easily led into immoral behavior. Considering the environment in which Janet lives, such compliant potential increases the underpinned tension of the poem. Robinson has surrounded Janet with immoral individuals. Janet's moral capacity is based on the environment in which she lives, yet socially constructed perceptions of intellectual impairment call into question whether Janet is naturally immoral or if she is simply at risk of echoing the behaviors around her. Her inability to know right from wrong, concepts socially ingrained and therefore unapparent to Janet, situates her as a sexual threat because of her sexual innocence. The community's inability to keep her safe from harm, sexual or otherwise, reflects on their anxiety toward her condition. Kept at a safe distance from her neighbors, Janet falls victim to the outside dangers that cause her death.

FM was contemporarily viewed by some as the most degenerative form of human life, and the form that produced all other degenerative types. Janet stands apart from the residents of her community, apart from being the only named character, because of her status as the lowest

form of human life. Robinson parses degenerative types according to the dominant imagination of FM as the main threat against the proliferation of 'normal' bodyminds. Dendy "insisted that the feeble-minded were not simply part of a wide spectrum of social problems (encompassing crime, unemployment, poverty, inebriety, prostitution, disease and so on) but the root cause of those problems: feeble-mindedness, she argued, was 'an evil which brings all other evils in its train".[87] Dendy's fixation on various forms of degeneration inflects upon a reading of Janet Fisher for a variety of reasons. That Janet is perpetually surrounded by, it can reasonably be surmised, each quality (crime, unemployment, poverty, inebriety, prostitution, disease, and other 'degenerative' qualities) brings numerous forms of degeneracy in proximity with one another. More significant than this is Dendy's proposition that the feeble-minded are the original "evil", in a hereditary sense. The permeation of degenerative qualities establishes the early tension of the narrative. However, it is not immediately clear who is affecting whom in this instance. In fact, the lustful deviancy with which this community regularly engages, resulting in so many "shameless maids" who give birth to "nameless children", who remain nameless because of the continued sexual proclivities of the "men whose brutal love was sin" (44, 45). The narrative goes so far as to question the moralistic origins of this community, supposing its nascence to be the result of some karmic justice: "Though how a village came to grow / In such a vile and deathly air / None knows; it may be long ago; the outcasts of some crime or woe, / Fleeing for refuge, sheltered there" (26-30). So, while sexual deviancy dominates as validation for the community's degraded state, the village's origins suggest the possibility of immorality, more broadly. There is a certain irony when we consider that Janet Fisher, despite her name, appears to have no father and the

[87] Jackson, Mark. "Institutional Provision for the Feeble-Minded in Edwardian England: Sandlebridge and the Scientific Morality of Permanent Care". *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996, p 169.

only clue to her parentage is that the community "took her when her mother died / to live in turn with each" (62-63). Janet's father is *never* mentioned. While it is likely that this alludes to the overarching genetic anxieties (a focal point of chapter 3 of this project) the absence of Janet's father suggests a narrative irony. It is quite likely that Janet's father lives within this community but is unwilling to come forward and acknowledge his progeny. Yet, the manner with which Robinson completely elides the father's existence suggests, to me, that Janet's father may be amongst the populace and is unaware that he is Janet's father. Even if this is the case, based on the moral qualities of the community, it seems unlikely that any of the men would out themselves as Janet's father. The stigma with which she is viewed would immediately be transplanted. Without any legal or blood relation, there is no obligation toward Janet. Though acknowledged as the resident 'idiot', the community is unwilling to take responsibility for Janet; her disability is acknowledged only as an emphatic point of caution—rather than consideration. Now, while she clearly points to the consequences of such communal disengagement with disability, which in this case results in Janet's death, Robinson's poem does paint a complex portrait of the community. While the reader may be primarily concerned about Janet's fate, the fate of this community is also in question.

The reciprocal nature of Janet's position reinforces class-based discussions of care; though Janet is disadvantaged, due to both her condition and being without a family, the rural community in which she finds herself is also not of high socioeconomic standing. In fact, Robinson's prose portrays a community amidst constant apocalypses, suggesting that "the end was always near" (36). Because this project is interested in constructions of intellectual disability, Janet has been a focal point of this chapter, yet Robinson points out an important facet: the ID individual does not exist in a vacuum. Apart from this reference to the end, which is "always near", the economic circumstances are not explained outright. There are hints that gesture toward

an economic struggle in the background, however. Robinson's portrayal of the environment surrounding the community bears metaphorical significance. The setting's miasmatic atmosphere suggests a level of taint or corruption that mirrors the communal sense of depravity inherent to their way of life. Clearly set apart from the rest of civilization, Robinson's poem emphasizes the rural nature of its subject matter, insisting upon the potentially depraved qualities of its inhabitants. Placed in the "Eastland Marshes", a space described as a miasmatic "poisonous fen" (35), the reader is immediately struck by the remoteness of Robinson's described village. But, just as significant as this sense of isolation is the recurring miasmatic imagery. This poisonous fen is teeming with "fetid vapors" (25) and a "vile and deathly air" (27), which appears to bleed into the relatively civilized area of the village, whose "rank pasture" and hovels "clustered close" (18, 20) incurs imagery of an area overflowing with both natural and unnatural growth. The claustrophobic sense that Robinson imagines, the result of human construction in such an uncultivated space, contrasts with the "eternal arch of sky (11), in a manner suggesting the insignificance and overall degraded qualities of Robinson's area of interest. Early on, the poem emphasizes the "scant harvest" and "leaning hovels" of a rural community. Considering the aguish environment surrounding the village, little wealth is to be found. The narrative infers a measure of rusticity or simplicity at the precipice of survival. Though the people around Janet engage in various behaviors of carnal excess, that excess does not expand into the economic realm. These are people content to eke out an existence far from the bustling cities that constitute contemporary notions of civilization. This, of course, requires that the various members of this community rely on each other.

Janet's intellectual ability, relative to other ID figures, provides her with labor value which is exchanged for social capital. While ID can often limit a person's ability to perform labor, this is not the case for Janet. Because she is not a burden, the relationship between her and her

neighbors is based on a mutual benefit, rather than charity. Oddly, there is overt objectification in the community's view of Janet as "their own fair thing, their one thing good" (56); Janet is not a member of this community but is a thing that persists among them, for them. Janet performs work for each family, simple chores such as "wind[ing] / Their well-ropes, bind[ing] their sheaves, and mind[ing] / Their cattle grazing far and wide" (63-65). Janet becomes as much a possession as the ropes she winds, the sheaves she binds, and the cattle she minds. But she also provides her neighbors with a sense of moral dignity. In this way, it might be helpful reading "Janet Fisher", at least in part, in terms of Talia Schaffer's *Communities of Care* (2021). Schaffer offers a literary criticism predicated on care, suggesting that readers can use the idea of care to frame relationships, behaviors, and people (2). Her text pushes against the common view of care as an inherently top-down form of labor, instead suggesting the value of horizontal, community-based care during the Victorian period. I allude to Schaffer because of the care-based structure by which Robinson enables Janet's continued existence. In the poem, the narrator generates an imagined settlement predicated on a fluid movement of care, in which Janet is cared for by various members of the community, while also performing a function for her caregivers. Though this communal care eventually fails to keep Janet from harm, the reciprocal nature of labor allows for a more sympathetic subject. Because Janet is not completely reliant upon her neighbors, her life has value. Schaffer's *Communities* is helpful in this regard as she deals with instances in which there is an interchange of care that can only come from living amongst people; the collective reality informs each person what they owe to one another, to enable continued existence. Schaffer, then, deals with horizontal forms of care, rather than care from the top-down. "Janet Fisher" does not take place in an urban environment in which the poorhouse is a possibility, for instance.

Combined with this horizontal form of care, Janet's status as a communal possession establishes a mode of labor-relations imbued with misconduct. The lack of oversight continues to be a problem. While there are no allusions to sexual violence, Robinson does suggest that these "brutish men", her "masters on the fen" might be working Janet to an excessive extent.[88] This is mere speculation, however, since the reader is only given brief descriptions of Janet's exhaustion after harvesting corn. However, this potential overworking of the mentally impaired could gesture to more severe forms of maltreatment. More importantly, Janet's internal thoughts while rowing give additional hints toward harm. She is elated and proud to be upon the water, and to be able to exhibit her skill to this newcomer (156); however, she is also "thankful to escape the lash" (158). Though this is the only instance, across the entire poem, in which the reader is given a direct hint towards physical abuse, there is little rationale given as to why she might have been subjected to lashings. So, while this community might be lauded, relatively speaking, by the way in which they care for each being that composes the group, it should also be acknowledged that this relationship is not entirely benevolent and, upon closer reading of Robinson's poem, the complexities of the relationship become more apparent. The interchange of services and labors suggests this community is aware of Janet's impairment and reduces the 'disabling' quality of her condition by bringing her closer (relatively speaking) to the community. Yet, social isolation is also one of, if not the most apparent, consequences of ID. So, Robinson's community can be commended for the manner with which they assure Janet's relative safety. Still, the potential for abuse lingers. While these lashings, perpetuated on a non-impaired individual, might be examined with scrutiny, the increased vulnerability of the intellectually impaired woman likely gives the modern reader additional pause. That Janet's internality on this subject is only granted to the reader once in the poem suggests that this behavior does not faze her; it is likely a repeated

[88] Robinson, p. 133, 131, 89.

occurrence. Robinson's poem, in depicting an exchange-based form of care, reveals a very real problem. Without oversight, there is always the potential for abuse. Robinson's poem, then, shares a certain cynicism towards horizontal forms of care; Janet's neighbors do not see her as an equal, which results in this failure of horizontal care. The hierarchical dynamic ingrained in eugenic philosophy does not allow for a pure form of horizontal care.

Robinson's settlement appears so estranged from civilization that its inhabitants rely upon each other "as though all were kin"; those who live in this space are not friends but there appears to be a mutually agreed obligation toward one another. But this obligation only extends so far, considering what appears to be a relatively level economic playing field. It is clear that some individuals, such as Janet due to her disability, are more deserving of care in this community, but the generalized poverty of the settlement establishes the stakes for each individual family unit. While there is a general sense of poverty across this settlement, there also appears an understanding of other ways in which these people are disadvantaged, and thus worthy of care. Because class-based differences, if there are any in this location, appear relatively flattened, the mode of care is more horizontal than vertical. But the pseudo-scientific leanings of the period destabilize any possibility of horizontal care. To be on the same plane with Janet would signal increased bodily or mental equality, a notion counterintuitive to Victorians obsessed with fitness and unfitness. Does Janet's community see this as a horizontal form of reciprocal care? My reading would suggest not. Instead, it is likely that Janet's neighbors still see her as an economic burden, in addition to her inherently sexually threatening nature.

Schaffer's form of care, to which Robinson alludes, involves a level of give-and-take that belies the conventional construction of care as a benevolent action. There do not appear to be any wealthy families or individuals to distribute their wealth to the less fortunate in Robinson's hypothetical formation. But this is partly Robinson's point. Schaffer directly argues against this

view of care as "a vaguely altruistic principle" (3); instead, she considers care to be "a difficult, often unpleasant, almost always underpaid, sometimes ineffective practice" (1). Janet's neighbors are prepared to only go so far to protect their 'village idiot', seeing her as a vulnerable individual who also threatens them, both economically and hereditarily. Clearly, this community's form of care fails, but I see this as a failure of enaction—not method. Robinson's poem is cognizant of its contemporary ideological movements. Portraying the failure of a communal effort to care for its orphaned feeble-minded girl, Robinson's poem shows attempts at care that fail because of an anxiety toward her particular type of degeneration. In more ways than one, Janet's condition shows how morally degenerated her community has become. The manner with which we treat our most vulnerable citizens, surely, reflects on our own sensibilities. Janet's amplified vulnerability is not unique to Janet, and Robinson's poem gestures toward a history of abuse against the intellectually disabled which continues to be studied today. These abuses speak to a continued prevalence of immoral behaviors toward individuals with ID.

Janet's situation portends the failure of horizontal care for individuals with ID because of the stigma associated with such conditions. The horizontal nature to which Schaffer alludes assumes that the subject requiring care has retained a certain level of personhood, that they are on a similar experiential level of subjectivity and agency as their peers. This form of care *can* provide the care required to sustain people with ID, as evidenced by 'intentional communities' such Botton Village in the U.K., communities designed to provide professional care, while allowing residents "a diverse range of employment", "individual and communal leisure activities", and "networks of friends".[89] However, mainstream American ideologies run counter to such socialist-leaning systems; I am reluctant to believe Americans would accept the logic of

[89] Randall, M and Cumella S. "People with an Intellectual Disability Living in an Intentional Community". *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, Vol. 53, No. 8, 2009, p. 717.

horizontal care—considering the inevitable perception of imbalanced labor. People with more severe forms of ID would be a point of friction, given their limited ability for labor. The legal protection granted to people with ID makes for complex relationality and discerns the propriety or impropriety of relationships between people with differing levels of mental functioning. Welcoming people with ID more fully into community life is an attractive idea, and it can provide value in certain areas for certain people. However, a community like Botton village requires certain socio-economic values of social responsibility and equity that are not universal. While communal care provides an agreeable alternative to top-down forms of institutional care, cost often outweighs accommodation.[90]

Conclusion

Robinson's *Arcadia* was published in the nascent period of the eugenic movement. Its individual poems deal with varying degrees of disability, gender, and socioeconomic status, but all are interested in society's response to these problems. For this project, I've fixated this chapter on "Janet Fisher", as it coincides with concerns surrounding milder forms of intellectual impairment, especially concerns of sexuality. In the Victorian period, concerns of the sexuality of FM individuals correlated with the notoriously iniquitous eugenic movement, resulting in a paradoxical FM figure who was simultaneously sexually vulnerable and sexually threatening. To conclude this chapter, I want to look to modern solutions for the treatment and care of people with ID. Unfortunately, there are no perfect solutions to the issue of care and ID; clearly, more work needs to be done.

---

[90] For more on the cost of accommodation types, see Emerson, Eric, Janet Robertson, Nicky Gregory, Chris Hatton, Sophia Kessissoglou, Angela Hallam, Martin Knapp, Krister Järbrink, Ann Netten, and Patricia Walsh. "The Quality and Costs of Village Communities, Residential Campuses and Community-Based Residential Supports for People with Learning Disabilities." *Tizard Learning Disability Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2000, pp. 5-16.

In 2022, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds announced the 2024 closure of Glenwood Resource Center due to the findings of a multi-year investigation of misconduct and abuse. Glenwood, originally established as the Iowa Institution for Feeble-Minded Children, was established in 1876 as an institutional option for individuals with ID. Its closure signals a larger shift across the U.S. away from institutional forms of care. The Des Moines Register reported that, since the late 1960s, the number of Americans living in institutions like Glenwood has dropped by 90%; Only five states have not closed any: Iowa, Nebraska, South Carolina, Utah, and Wyoming.[91] Glenwood's closure, while illuminating issues related to the care of the ID, also begs the question: Where will its residents go? Removing a person with an ID from a long-term living situation entails pronounced difficulties. Many of the residents are being moved into long-term living situations, such as nursing homes or long-term in-community care. Such care invokes something more like Janet's situation. Such forms of care come with their own set of challenges and are by no means an all-encompassing solution to the questions my analysis has raised. The specific mode of care that each individual requires creates a situation with several moving parts. And yet, there is no guarantee that the individual's required level of care will not shift at some point. The totality of challenges that come with issues of ID and care are too numerous to address in this chapter. But, it seems apparent that the long-running problems of institutionalization require a deliberate and public ideological shift, lest the historical institutional abuses permeate the present even further.

The circumstances of Glenwood's closure need to be examined, especially considering the resulting discussion around the vulnerability of people with ID. Glenwood is just one recent

[91] Leys, Tony. "Where do the residents of Iowa's Glenwood Resource Center Go When it Closes?" *Des Moines Register*, last modified September 12, 2022. https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2022/09/12/when-glenwood-resource-center-closes-where-residents-go-disabilities-iowa/8028576001/

example of the failure of 'top-down' forms of institutional care. Yet, though its closure was only recently announced, Glenwood has a history of underperformance with records of "overcrowding" and "abuse of restraints". Furthermore, in 2002 an investigation concluded that Glenwood and its subsidiary, Woodward, were "constitutionally deficient" and the state was encouraged to assist in transitioning its residents into more community-integrated settings.[92] But the recent controversy entails far more disturbing details. In an ongoing lawsuit, former superintendent Jerry Rea is alleged to have headed up experiments on Glenwood residents. These experiments included, but were not limited to, "sexual arousal" studies, in which Rea began by adjusting medications, which often induced unexpected symptoms such as seizures; he then "allegedly purchased with state money, silk sheets or silk boxer shorts, sexual lubricants, photos that included pornographic images and a dedicated computer for the research".[93] Rea's interest in arousal studies goes at least as far back as 1998, when he patented a device to measure sexual stimulation; he has also published several articles looking at "sexual offenders" diagnosed with ID. Rea, it seems, felt comfortable continuing the work of Victorians like Mary Dendy or even Cesare Lombroso—and even pushing this work further, into the realm of human experimentation.

However, I want to point out that Glenwood is emblematic of institutional failure not only because of its sexual misconduct, but because of the numerous abuses that were allowed to occur within its walls. This chapter prioritized Janet Fisher's sexual precarity by paying attention to its metaphorical significance in the story; but Janet is placed into very real environmental danger that results in her death. In addition to Rea's troubling experimentation, the 2019

---

[92] Hawbreaker, Becky Wilson. "'No Middle Ground': Change and Controversy at Glenwood State School". *Iowa Heritage Illustrated,* pp. 63-66, 82, 1998.
[93] Kauffman, Clark. "Lawsuit Claims Reynolds' staff, AG's office approved sexual-arousal experiments at Glenwood". *Iowa Capital Dispatch*, last modified December 2, 2020. https://iowacapitaldispatch.com/2020/12/02/lawsuit-claims-reynolds-staff-ags-office-approved-sexual-arousal-experiments-at-glenwood/

investigation resulted in various lawsuits against six workers. Of the six, one was found guilty in court and four others pled guilty. The sixth case has yet to conclude, at the time of this writing. While the investigation alleges a variety of abuses, perhaps the most shocking involves a worker "striking…[a resident] in the head with the handle of a butter knife" while another worker held the resident down.[94] And yet, without the integrity of another staff member, who recorded the abuse on their phone, these abuses would never see public scrutiny. Each worker was charged with "wanton neglect" and required to serve only two to four weeks in jail. This seems a shockingly light sentence considering the wildly traumatic experience for both residents and their family members. Glenwood's closure speaks to the general shift away from institutional care, partly due to the mistrust engendered in stories like Glenwood's.

"Janet Fisher" demonstrates the failure of a community to keep their local FM girl safe. While it is easy to read this as a failure of communal forms of care, I argue instead that the problem to which Robinson alludes is an ideological one. Views of ID or FM people as subhuman enable people to validate immoral treatment of those people. The stigma attached to ID remains a problem, and institutionalization remains a part of that problem. It makes sense that stigmatic views would propagate in the eugenic movement, an ideology obsessed with intelligence and normality. But still stigma remains, and it will surely remain if institutionalization remains the go-to method of caring for individuals with ID. Robinson's poem depicts a contemporary shift in care for people with ID. Yet, Robinson's poem, emerging in an interval of surveillance of abnormal bodyminds, showcases the contradictory problematics of the eugenic period as it viewed ID bodyminds. The care that Robinson depicts is not feasible partly because of the view of Janet as 'abnormal'. While I applaud recent shifts toward more community-based forms of

---

[94] "Judge Sentences Ex-Iowa Workers Accused of Resident Abuse". *Associated Press*, Last modified February 27, 2018. **https://apnews.com/general-news-5dce4ef628a54958b82456ce07ce079f**

care, to fully endeavor in such a project requires a fundamental ideological shift in how we see people with ID in the U.S.

Joseph Conrad's "The Idiots", Maternity, and the Intellectual Uncanny

This chapter looks at Joseph Conrad's "The Idiots" (1896) through disability and feminist lenses. I argue that "The Idiots" presents intellectual disability as a source of hereditary anxiety, resulting in gendered and ableist responses to the patriarchal institution of the family. The genetic concerns surrounding congenital disabilities at the end of the nineteenth century implicate adjacent family members in the propagation of qualities deemed deficient. This chapter is primarily interested in the relationship between two figures: the mother, Susan, and her intellectually disabled child/young adult. Though a seemingly simple bond, this relationship is complicated by an historicized account of family dynamics, as filtered through eugenic ideology of the period. However, while this periodization is helpful in situating Conrad's narrative, this chapter also finds traction in the liminal space afforded between modern Feminist and Disability discourses. My argument centers on the methodological contention between these ideological apparatuses. However, in this discussion of the woman/mother experience, this chapter also veers into psychoanalytical territory through Conrad's invocation the uncanny. Conrad's narrative stresses genetic anxiety through its intense scrutiny of generational genetics. The narrative, while titled after Susan's children, is equally, if not more so, concerned with her mental existence in light of her traumatic motherly experience. Emphasizing the relationship between mothers and their disabled children, Conrad's narrative challenges the idea of maternal altruism in relation to questions of bodily autonomy. Yet, the intersectional nature of Conrad's narrative entreats the reader to also consider the disabled child's role in this patriarchal structure. In this way Conrad's story, which emphasizes the lack of women's bodily autonomy during the period, also narrativizes the woman's body as a manufacturer of deficient traits, invoking ableist sentiments in keeping with eugenic interests at the turn of the century. This chapter, therefore, explores the

contentious space between gender and disability as they coincide with maternity and patriarchal power dynamics in the late nineteenth century.

"The Idiots" is split into two parts, the division of which informs readerly experience. The first part, the frame narrative (set in the future), follows a traveling cart as it passes a nearby farmstead. As they pass, the driver informs his passenger on the farm's inhabitants: an elderly woman and her four intellectually disabled grandchildren, two of which are boy and girl twins. The parents of these children are inexplicably absent. During the day, the children inhabit the road, providing passersby with a spectacle of unusual behaviors. As the frame concludes, the reader is whisked into the past, and granted a vision of newlyweds Jean-Pierre and Susan, who will soon procreate in the hopes of having a healthy male child to whom Jean-Pierre can pass on his name and property. Each subsequent 'unhealthy' birth inflates Jean-Pierre's obstinance while it deflates Susan's optimism (and increases her social alienation). This disparity ultimately leads to Jean-Pierre's death, when he forces himself upon his wife and she, afraid of giving birth to yet another disabled child, kills her husband with a pair of scissors. Susan flees from her home and her children. Believing herself to be chased along a cliffside by the ghost of her husband, Susan falls to her death. It is unclear if this is a suicide or accident. The narrative concludes with the children being remanded to the care of their grandmother.

Even beyond the Victorian period, motherhood has been viewed as the primary occupation for women throughout history. Adrienne Rich maintains that "The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests" before pointing toward a variety of actions and behaviors that might delegitimize patriarchy as an institution.[95] The sole means of perpetuating patriarchal power resides in the subjugation of

[95] Illegitimacy, abortion, and lesbianism are some such phenomenon that Rich suggests are detrimental to patriarchal society; because of this they are often viewed as "deviant and criminal." Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution.* W.W. Norton & Company, 1986, p. 25.

women in the role as 'mother', as several scholars have argued.[96] In Conrad's text, Susan is first introduced in terms of her new family, with the expectation that she will perpetuate the Bacadou family legacy. She is first noted only through her relation to this new family: Jean's mother "was pleased with her daughter-in-law" and even on her wedding night, the bride is "kept out of the way, letting father and mother reap their due of honour and thanks".[97] Susan's position in the early stages of the narrative is as a placeholder, a newly-married wife whose coming foretells Jean's takeover of the farm from his parents. Before the very next paragraph, which begins with the birth of Jean and Susan's twins, the relationship between past, present, and future is laid out, culminating in the succinct idiom that "the world is to the young" (46). The irony of this statement is acutely apparent to the reader, who has already seen the future of the Bacadou family. This irony reinforces the feminist stakes of the narrative: the 'future' is harvested from Susan's body without regard for her physical or mental health.

ReFraming Uncanniness and Intellectual Disability

This chapter first argues that Conrad locates the uncanny through his rhetorical use of intellectual disability; this uncanniness is filtered through common behaviors of intellectual disability and ASD (Autism-Spectrum Disorder), behaviors that visualize hereditary traits. Conrad's narrative pushes a visual uncanniness through behaviors common in both ID and ASD that causes family members to question the stability of their own bodyminds. First conceived by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*, most readers are familiar with the uncanny through Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay. "The Uncanny" criticizes Jentsch's understanding

[96] Coppelia Kahn cites scholars such as Jean Baker Miller, Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Nancy Chodorow in making this claim. Kahn, Coppelia. "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd Edition, Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 826.
[97] Conrad, Joseph. "The Idiots". *Tales of Unrest,* pp. 45-46.

of the concept, suggesting that the uncanny does not arise merely from "intellectual uncertainty",[98] but is in fact deeply entrenched in primitive drives long since repressed (147). Defining the uncanny has proven difficult considering its near pervasiveness across literary scholarship. Even Freud's etymological exploration of the term proves elusive as he compounds meaning upon meaning to the term. Suffice it to say that, for Freud, a denotational understanding of the uncanny emerges "when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed" (155). Compounding this definition, Freud's etymological inquiry states plainly that the uncanny is something once familiar (*Heimlich*) which has since become unfamiliar (*Unheimlich*). This is cogent enough, but as he is prone to do, Freud goes down several avenues upon which this chapter will not follow, such as his discussion of the uncanny as a fear of castration (139). Rather, what I take away from Freud's attempts at definition is the fixation upon the invisible made visible. The uncanny finds purchase in refusing the viewer an expected outcome.

It is significant that both Jentsch and Freud's original analyses look to literature for potent examples of the uncanny; yet, equally significant for this chapter, is the fact that their chosen narrative, "The Sandman" by E.T. Hoffman, finds its uncanny elements through disability. Hoffman's narrative tells of a bogeyman-type figure, the titular Sandman, who punishes children who refuse to go to bed by casting sand in their eyes. This causes the children's eyes to leap from their sockets, to be gathered up by the Sandman. This supernatural figure takes various human forms (named Coppelia and Coppola) to haunt Nathanael, the protagonist, throughout his life. One notable plot point involves Olympia, Nathanael's lover, whom he discovers to be automaton created by Coppelius and an individual named Spallanzani. Nathanael discovers Coppelius and Spallanzani arguing over who constructed which parts, deconstructing Olympia's body into two

[98] Qtd. in Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny". *The Uncanny.* Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 125.

facets: the clockwork and the eyes. Ultimately, Hoffman's narrative puts Nathanael through various traumatic plot points based on the eyes and the visual. Freud's attention to this narrative draws some important connections to disability, broadly. Yet, there are several points from Hoffman's narrative that speak specifically to intellectual disability, aestheticized through its notable invisibility. The uncanniness of intellectual disability, in Conrad's narrative, comes about because of its potential for inadvertent subterfuge. Freud's analysis even suggests that there is a possibility for *intentional* deception, putting forth yet another definition of the uncanny that reads: "To act secretively, as if one had something to hide" (Freud, 2003 130). Of course, this runs counter to the predominant view, as exemplified throughout the writings in this chapter, in which idiocy is signaled by a lack of agency or intentionality. Yet, as we will see, Conrad's representation aestheticizes this unintentional nature while it also implies some measure of agency on behalf of the condition itself. But, the insidious quality of this deception, I suggest, is yet another aspect for social anxiety regarding forms of mental disability. The familial concern of being infiltrated and contaminated by deficient bodyminds becomes more pronounced throughout the latter half of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Readers are likely familiar with other representations of mental disability utilized for their supposed intentional insidiousness like Bertha Rochester of *Jane Eyre*. However, Conrad's narration fixates on perceptively unconscious behaviors endemic to individuals on the autism spectrum, a condition commonly linked to intellectual disability. Depictions of ID have the potential to produce uncanny emotions partly because they are not easily detected and diagnosed, but also because they can mold the human body into a suddenly unfamiliar object through the audiovisual presence of motor and phonic stereotypies. For the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to motor stereotypies, defined by Cláudia Melo et al., as "a type of hyperkinetic movement disorder currently defined as involuntary, patterned, repetitive, continuous, coordinated, purposeless, and ritualistic movements, postures, or

utterances"; however, Melo et al. also point to social aspects of such actions, claiming they are often viewed as "socially inappropriate and alienating behavior".[99]

By configuring the intellectually disabled bodymind along similar lines as Hoffman's Olympia, a thing composed of two parts: soulless eyes and mechanical clockwork, Conrad reinforces a literary history that conflates idiocy with automation. This history relies on the production of an uncanny visual, perpetuated partly through repetitive behaviors common in individuals with various forms of mental disability. Stereotypies have been a driving image in the production of the "idiot" as a literary figure. Though much can be made of the eyes as one half of this bifurcation, the repetitive nature of stereotypies has also provided evidence of the mechanical nature of the intellectually disabled figure. Similarly, Jentsch, the original critic of Hoffman's narrative, makes note of forms of "manifestations of insanity" such as epilepsy that "arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person".[100] Jentsch and Freud are both especially attentive to comorbidities, such as epilepsy, associated with instances of intellectual disability and ASD; both psychoanalysts look to moments in which the mind is unable to exert its will control over the body, as in the case of an epileptic seizure. For Freud, the power of the unconscious mind, which in this case appears untethered to an intentional capacity to control the body, can be driven to a "*compulsion to repeat"* though "instinctual impulses" (Italics in Original, 145). He goes on to argue that this is "still clearly manifest in the impulses of small children and dominates part of the course taken by the psychoanalysis of victims of neurosis". Making an implicit connection between the mindfulness of children and individuals diagnosed with neuroses, Freud looks to

[99] Melo, Cláudia et al. "Prevalence and determinants of motor stereotypies in autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis". *Autism,* Vol. 24, No. 3, 2020, pp. 570.
[100] Qtd. on Freud, p. 135.

instances of compulsive repetition as they momentarily bifurcate the bodymind into a visual of animalistic instinct and mental detachment.

"The Idiots" opens with a frame narrative set in the future, following an unnamed narrator and his driver travelling by cart along a rural road. Along the way, his companion explains the mythos surrounding one local farm, a farm beset by a cluster of young intellectually disabled people. The pair pass an "imbecile face" and "bullet head with close-cropped hair",[101] the rest of the individual's body hidden amongst the shrubbery of the ditch. This first figure gives way to a sequence of others whose positionality and appearance invokes an unsettling aesthetic. As the cart continues on, the driver suddenly cries out "Ah! there's another". This exclamation, delivered "with a certain satisfaction in his tone as if he had caught sight of something expected", reveals the public perception of the surrounding community; the family exists on the fringe of society to the extent that this cart-driver travels along the nearby road, reimagining the figures he passes as spectacles for he and his partner's amusement. In fact, the driver appears intimately attuned to the Bacadou family, noting that they gather along the road during the day only to "come home at dusk along with the cattle" (44). Conrad's frame narrative describes the Bacadou children in increasingly inhuman terms, beginning with this transparent juxtaposition between the children and cattle to the disembodiment of the initial visage. From this image of domesticated animality, Conrad reinforces the Bacadou's inhumanity further, writing: "It was a boy's face. He might have been sixteen, judging from the size—perhaps less, perhaps more. Such creatures are forgotten by time, and live untouched by years till death gathers them up into its compassionate bosom; the faithful death that never forgets in the press of work the most insignificant of its children" (43). This passage works toward describing the visual image of the first Bacadou child, initially describing the "boy's face" before slipping from humanist language to describe a

[101] Conrad, p. 43.

"creature". The inherent ableism in this passage is difficult to escape, especially considering Conrad's openly eugenic language. That faithful death that comes to each living thing finds time even for those who are almost too "insignificant" for its attention. But this death should not be feared, in Conrad's view; rather, the death that finally remembers to come for this demographic is a "compassionate" one, suggestively able to rescue the children from a life of utter insignificance. Though allegedly insignificant in comparison with the rest of humanity, the Bacadou children ironically remain a point of locus for the entire familial chronicle, driving a narrative through their mere existence.

Even when they are the focal point of a scene, the Bacadou youths perform the uncanny though a lack of social and environmental engagement; in some cases, less activity increases uncanny potential. As the cart passes the second Bacadou child, his unwavering attentiveness to the passing cart is challenged by simultaneous disinterest. He ominously stands in the center of the road and fails to fully acknowledge the passing cart save for the minimal movement required to avoid being trampled underfoot: "The idiot shuffled two paces out of the way and looked at us over his shoulder when we brushed past him. The glance was unseeing and staring, a fascinated glance; but he did not turn to look after us" (44). Authors have frequently referenced the vacant stare or the glassy eye which seems an indelible aspect of the idiot archetype.[102] The significance of the eyes, in general, need not be reiterated in detail here as the reader is likely familiar with the organs' Judeo-Christian implications toward the soul.[103] Intellectually disabled bodyminds are frequently described in terms of perceptual, and therefore phenomenological, absence. If one

[102] Chapter two examined Barnaby Rudge whose perception and behavior is referred to eight times across the lengthy novel as "vacant". At no point in the novel is the word used to refer to anyone or anything else.
[103] "The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eyes are sound, you will have light for your whole body; if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be in darkness. If then the only light you have is darkness, how great a darkness that will be" *The Bible.* The Oxford Study Bible, Oxford University Press, 1992, Matthew 6.22-23.

cannot perceive, through whatever senses are available, then one cannot experience and thus loses a fundamental aspect of the human condition. This line of reasoning, of course, takes a leap of faith that I am unwilling to follow; the suggestion here is that the individual on a different plane of intellectual functioning is unable to truly experience the world. That the experience is different from that of the normate is undoubtedly true; surely the bodily capacity to sense and interpret experience adjusts the lived reality of the individual, especially considering the myriad social constructions that codify daily lived experiences. Yet this notion that such an individual is less "significant" suggests similarly that their experience is less valuable, that the reader need not concern themselves with what this glance is perceiving. By removing the significance of the eyes from the figure of the idiot Conrad's narration removes the value of that individual's subjective experience. The removal of this subjectivity enables Conrad to display his intellectually disabled figures, in the most objectified manner possible, as automatons. While the visual components that I have traced thus far can be seen as socially alienating, I am reluctant to say that these fit neatly into a contemporary understanding of stereotyped movement, especially considering the contentiousness of any specific definitions, which tend to bely the myriad ways such behavior is performed.[104] Conrad's depiction of phonic stereotypies, I think, is more in line with current scholarship on the topic, as I will discuss shortly.

This discussion of optics and automation recalls Jentsch's and Freud's analysis of "The Sandman", itself the source from which discourse on the uncanny emerges. Having been

---

[104] Motor stereotypies have proven to be a broad concept; the *OED* defines them in pathological terms as the "persistence of a fixed or stereotyped idea, mode of action, etc., in cases of insanity" or in zoological terms as "the frequent repetition by an animal of an action that serves no obvious purpose". These definitions are lacking in specificity, one referring to "cases of insanity" which fails to acknowledge the breadth of mental conditions under the umbrella of insanity, the other referring to behaviors present not only in humans, but to animals in general. However, the *OED*'s claim that stereotyped movement "serves no obvious purpose" does point to the perceived irrationality of such movements, a quality germane to discussions of ID and other forms of neurodiversity. "Stereotypy". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stereotypy_n?tab=meaning_and_use#20629896. Accessed 31 July 2024.

constructed by the nefarious Coppola and her father-figure Spalanzani, Olympia embodies the uncanny upon the discovery of her ambiguously human bodymind. Initially viewing Olympia through a telescopic lens given to him by the mysterious Coppelius/Coppola figure, Nathanael is overcome by the beauty of her body, seemingly a perfect image of the human form. Yet, despite her eligibility, Olympia is locked away by Spalanzani, leading to rampant speculation around her mental acuity. Nathanael suspects that there is "something peculiar about her – she may be weak-minded or something".[105] Nathanael's thoughts project Olympia as an outwardly beautiful woman, extraordinarily so, having yet to see her behave up close. Olympia is finally properly introduced during a ball held by Spalanzani, who uses the event to display his creation to the world, a sort of public Turing test.[106] Yet, there is something unsettling about Olympia. Nathanael notes that "her pace and posture had about them something deliberate and stiff which many found unpleasing".[107] While performing her ladylike functions during the ball, Olympia fails to charm the guests who instead find the "singular exactitude of rhythm" in her dancing and the "piercingly clear, bell-like" quality in her singing to be unsettling (114, 112). Her actions are all too measured, too exact, to be human. Yet, Olympia does not openly evoke fear. Though her behavior is enough to elicit "suppressed laughter" from many of the guests (114), a reaction that incenses

---

[105] Hoffman, E.T.A. "The Sandman". *Tales of Hoffman*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 99. Hoffman's original language uses the term "blödsinnig", which has been a point of contention amongst translations. Gutenberg.org uses the translation "perhaps she's an idiot or something of that sort" whereas a translation from John Oxenford runs "she is half-witted perhaps, or something of the kind". Each of these translations gestures toward the notion of idiocy, while also suggesting it could be "something" similar, if not idiocy exactly. This is in keeping with the 19C's definitions of idiocy, which were often in flux across psychiatric discourse.

[106] The Turing Test is defined in the *OED* as "A test of a computer's ability to exhibit intelligence, requiring that a human being should be unable to distinguish the computer from another human being using only replies to questions that are put to both". "Turing Test". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/turing-test_n?tab=meaning_and_use#10548429. Accessed 5 November 2024. So, when Spalanzani "passed by the happy couple [Olympia and Nathanael] and smiled at them in a singularly contented way" (114) during the ball, he appears to be pleased with his construction's performance, having thus far passed a form of Turing Test, since Nathanael is unable to detect Olympia's inhumanity.

[107] Hoffman, p. 113.

Nathanael. Nathanael's friend Siegmund attempts to elucidate the crowd's reaction to Olympia's perfunctory beauty:

> Do not take it ill, brother, but she has appeared to us in a strange way rigid and soulless. Her figure is well proportioned; so is her face – that is true! She might be called beautiful if her eyes were not so completely lifeless, I could even say sightless. She walks with a curiously measured gait; every movement seems as if controlled by clockwork. When she plays and sings it is with the unpleasant soulless regularity of a machine, and she dances in the same way. We have come to find this Olympia quite uncanny; we would like to have nothing to do with her; it seems to us that she is only acting like a living creature, and yet there is some reason for that which we cannot fathom. (116)

In a relatively extensive manner, Siegmund puts forth the myriad ways through which Olympia fulfills the uncanny. Though she is aesthetically attractive, the "clockwork" nature of her movement contrasts with an expectation of human imperfection. The perfect proportions to which her body is constructed are paired with immaculate bodily control. Yet the perfection of these proportions also draws immediate attention to any deficient aspects, in this case: the eyes. Siegmund says that Olympia's eyes are not only "lifeless", but "sightless". The rhetorical nature of this phrasing is curious. By qualifying his initial statement, Siegmund suggests that the sightless nature of the eyes is of deeper concern than their lifelessness. This, I argue, is a distinction of agency. By claiming that Olympia's eyes contain life but do not see suggests that Olympia is unable to control the dominant means of perception by which one reacts to stimuli, which then facilitates a response. Instead, Olympia's movements seem to be mechanical, ordained to act in a certain fashion regardless of her environment. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Siegmund suspects a level of performativity, an inherent falseness, in Olympia's everyday

actions. Though appearing human, Olympia exhibits no response to suggest an awareness of the things around her.

Olympia's construction upholds a traditionally understood bifurcation of the human that is deeply reliant on the eyes as the dominant mode of perception and interaction. Near the end of the narrative, Nathanael is shocked to witness an altercation between Coppelius and Spalanzani. The pair are discovered fighting over the lifeless body of Olympia, each staking claim to the composite whole, despite both having constructed only one facet. Spalanzani, as a watchmaker, claims the bodily "clockwork" earns him control of his adoptive daughter; Coppelius, claims his creation of the eyes awards him control. Through this argument, Hoffman lays out a succinct breakdown of the human as a composition of clockwork and eyes or, in traditional western ideology, the body and soul. The connection between sensual deficiency and idiocy has a long history, as evidenced by William Ireland who writes in 1877 that "a being destitute of sight, hearing, and touch, could never so connect itself with the outer world as to show anything beyond the feeblest mental manifestations, and would thus be regarded as an idiot".[108] Interestingly enough, however, Ireland finds that hearing, taste, and smell are more likely to be deficient in individuals with intellectual disability than sight (258-260). Edward Seguin, publishing in 1866, alternatively alludes to a series of common optical attributes "be it [the pupil] fixed in one canthus [corner of the eye], be it wandering and unfixable, be it glossy, laughing, like a picture moving behind a motionless varnish, be it dull and immured to images, its meanings are not doubtful; it means idiocy".[109] Now, Seguin also points to the possibility for misdiagnoses due to the failure of sensory organs via some "independent affection". So, while intellectual disability

[108] Ireland, William Wotherspoon. *On Idiocy and Imbecility.* J. & A. Churchill, 1877, p. 254.
[109] Seguin, Edward. *Idiocy And Its Treatment by the Physiological Method.* Vol. 1, 1907, p. 45.

can affect sensory functions, the eyes have been overdetermined via representations of idiocy as a surefire means of diagnosis and an indicator of personhood.

To return to Conrad, the overdetermination of optical inactivity is visualized with the second Bacadou child, whose personhood is immediately questioned due to his inattentiveness. Standing in the center of the road, he appears oblivious to the surrounding environment. So, when the narrator's cart rolls into sight, the young man remains in the center of the road "staring" and "unseeing", before he reluctantly shuffles out of the way, hardly acknowledging the two travelers: "Probably the image passed before the eyes without leaving any trace on the misshapen brain of the creature. When we had topped the ascent I looked over the hood. He stood in the road just where we had left him".[110] While "staring" and "unseeing", the Bacadou youth performs the bodymind's duality by separating the motor from the mental act. Conrad's description alludes to the physiological function of the brain, the physical shape of which suggests deviation from the norm that limits the willful ability to engage with the eyes' subject. Yet, this is where Conrad's narrative ceases in its attempt to describe the young man's mental faculty. Writing from a clinical perspective approximately 30 years prior to Conrad's story, Seguin reports a similar phenomenon in young intellectually disabled children, noting "the repugnance of the child to look and the incapacity of his will to control the organs of vision; he sees by chance, but never looks" (45). Between Conrad and Seguin we can see an implicit docility. Conrad fixates on the perceived image as it 'passes' before the viewer while Seguin iterates that the idiot "never looks" but merely "sees by chance". Differentiating between the intentional act of looking and the unintentional act of seeing, Seguin's passage recalls us to Conrad's image of the young boy on the road, who is unwilling or unable to really *see* the passing cart and its inhabitants. But Seguin's passage also directly refers to the will, a signifier for the capacity to practice consciousness in the nineteenth

[110] Conrad, p. 44.

century; this reference makes clear the repugnant, or contradictory, relationship between the boy's ability to see and the mental acuity required to intentionally direct that sight. Analyses of the nineteenth-century idiot, exemplified here in both fiction and psychiatric scholarship, puts pressure on the physical body of the intellectually disabled subject. The overlap of physical and mental disability becomes intricately intertwined because of the depth of cultural meaning behind specific bodily components, especially those involved in the perceptual process. Both writers work toward a unified view of the intellectually disabled bodymind as one torn between both physical and mental fragmentation.

The final Bacadou children, twins, transition from passive staring to more abrasive, phonic behavior. The passage, which I will provide at length, goes into an immersive description of the young adults:

> They were dressed exactly alike, in shapeless garments with petticoat-like skirts. The imperfect thing that lived within them moved those beings to howl at us from the top of the bank, where they sprawled amongst the tough stalks of furze. Their cropped black heads stuck out from the bright yellow wall of countless small blossoms. The faces were purple with the strain of yelling; the voices sounded blank and cracked like a mechanical imitation of old people's voices; and suddenly ceased when we turned into a lane. (44)

It is unclear if the twins are responding to visual stimuli or is this a possible example of stimming, or phonic stereotyping. The contemporary term, for me, is irrelevant. Rather, I do see Conrad, possibly unsuccessfully, attempting to depict socially alienating behavior that could be associated with ASD or ID, through this phonic behavior. Like the first Bacadou child, the twins position their bodies amidst the flowery shrubbery, exhibiting a countenance of apparent hostility or anguish. The visual is striking on its own. Little is provided to distinguish these figures, a boy and girl, from each other; despite their genders, each is crudely sheared and dressed in the same

manner. This doubling might make for an uncanny visual, even without the unsettling vocal aspect. The 'doppelganger', a motif borne out of German Romanticism, is frequently evoked in the uncanny, given the figure's "evil" or "demonic" presence which suggests a "subject/subjectivity that is defective, disjunct, split, threatening, spectral"; the doppelganger signals a "failure of loss in the self" and an "excess of limits".[111] While Conrad's narrative does not venture into this particular Gothic tradition, the deliberate addition of the twins weaves a visual uncanny into the picture by which the viewer questions each twin's individuality and originality, perceiving a visual fragmentation in which "the very reality" of each child "is made dubious by the other". Each twin's perceived subjectivity is further reduced by the addition of their behavior, copied by the other. The spectacle of "faces purple with the strain of yelling" gives way to shrieks shrill with the appearance of emotion despite overt references to their simultaneously mechanical nature. The sonic quality is especially telling; though the sounds being produced appear borne from human emotion, they are "blank and cracked like a mechanical imitation of old people's voices". The unconscious quality of the voices is evident, considering the blankness of the voices. The reference to an "imitation of old people's voices" is more ambiguous, though I would proffer a familial connection considering the genealogical aspect of the narrative. That there is some resonance, some thread, between the Bacadou children and their grandparents is suggested in the various moments of genealogical considerations. Most notably, there are oblique references to some mental disorder that plagued Susan's now-deceased father as well as the curious manner with which Jean-Pierre's father views the children after their birth. It is likely that the Bacadou children have inherited some sinister quality from not just Susan and Jean-Pierre, but from farther up their family tree.

---

[111] Vardoulakis, Dimitris. "The Return of Negation: The Doppelganger in Freud's 'The "Uncanny"'". *SubStance*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2006, pp. 101-102.

While this audio-visual presentation is intriguing, more noteworthy is the direct manner with which Conrad refers to the condition of "idiocy" itself, materially manifested as an "imperfect thing" that "lived within them" and directs their behavior. The personification of idiocy as a living entity reconfigures the intellectually disabled mind as a physical area in which some foreign entity has taken residence, invading the most private and inaccessible of spaces. It is worth noting that idiocy's personification is juxtaposed with the animalization of the twins who are now moved "to howl" at the narrator from a distance, in keeping with philosophical views on the mechanical nature of animals. Freud has noted the uncanny quality of mental disorders such as epilepsy and madness, both of which are often comorbid diagnoses or misdiagnoses of various forms of intellectual impairment and ASD. The uncanniness of such conditions, for Freud, emerges from their invisible nature and a natural concern of other individuals' "covert intention to harm" us.[112] On the surface, this is an anxiety of appearances; mental disabilities such as epilepsy and idiocy exist beyond visual space. In such cases, the human visage becomes a façade behind which some concealed entity resides, intent on perpetuating its existence. In fact, this personification of idiocy appears to have a will of its own, as suggested by the Bacadous' aimless roadside behavior, enacted "according to the inexplicable impulses of their monstrous darkness".[113] Designated as an 'imperfect thing' and a 'monstrous darkness' lurking within the minds of the children, Conrad reconstitutes idiocy as an agential malevolency hiding in the dark recesses of the neuroatypical and neurotypical mind: "Here the layman sees a manifestation of forces that he did not suspect in a fellow human being, but whose stirrings he can dimly perceive in remote corners of his own personality".[114] The uncanniness of some mental disorders is reliant upon the tenuous belief that our perception of individuals' physical and mental experience runs

[112] Freud, p. 147.
[113] Conrad, p. 44.
[114] Freud, p. 150.

parallel to our own. Visibility is key here; in the same breath the narrator notes that "They were an offence to the sunshine, a reproach to empty heaven, a blight on the concentrated and purposeful vigour of the wild landscape".[115] There are several notable elements here. Conrad's degrading language is clear from the outset. Perhaps most overt, the final three clauses situate these young adults, employing moralistic language to convey the impropriety of Conrad's idiots inhabiting the space that they do. Conrad uses language that suggests the taboo interplay between his subject matter and their environment, reminiscent of Dickens' use of light in *Barnaby Rudge*. The young adults, on full display in the midday sun, offend with their "monstrous darkness" and for this offense are reproached by the surveying heavens, which recognizes a tainting influence that this group has on the natural environment. Concerns of heredity are not limited to the passing of genetic traits but also extend to issues of property and lineage. This visibility, an opportunity to portray an oft-obfuscated form of disability, illuminates the troubling manner with which nineteenth-century intellectual impairments were purveyed to the public. Conrad and other writers have historically relied on a literary tradition that emphasizes external and internal juxtaposition as a means of portraying intellectual disability.[116] So when a difference in mental experience is embodied through physical action, the viewer is forced to reconcile the uncanny view of a human performing 'inhuman' mental functions, often through the repetition of stereotypic behavior.

Having painted a vibrantly disconcerting image of idiocy, the opening sequence of Conrad's short story sets the stage for the hereditary inquisition to follow. By displaying idiocy as an unfamiliar condition housed within the familiar shape of the human body, "The Idiots" preys

---

[115] Conrad, p. 44.
[116] Curiously enough, many literary 'idiot boys' are considered attractive, such as Stevie from *The Secret Agent* (1907) who is described as "delicate and, in a frail way, good-looking too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip".

upon the visible/invisible dichotomy that are at play with the depiction of some mental disabilities. While the behavior of some intellectually disabled individuals are often viewed as socially inappropriate, Conrad's depiction lacks the nuance embedded in the spectrum of the behavior. Perhaps, one could argue, this is because Conrad depicts the individuals who have been most deeply impacted by their disability. In truth, it has been reported that the severity of intellectual disability and/or ASD is intertwined with the frequency of stereotypies and other socially alienating behaviors.[117] The entire opening sequence, the first and only time in which the Bacadou children are presented across the entire narrative, paints a dehumanizing image of ID. The scene, and this final passage in particular, depict stereotypic behavior at its most alienating, foregoing the spectrum of behaviors that are commonly associated with conditions like ASD and ID. This disability-focused frame narrative establishes such behavior as a problem and its underlying conditions as mysteries to be solved. In fact, the opening frame narrative establishes the Bacadou childrens' narratorial significance only to push them to the periphery as their parents' conflict takes center stage.

Maternity and the Reproduction of [Un]Health

The frame narrative visualizes the future of the Bacadou family and imagines an unsettling disabled future; but this visualization also implies a promise to the reader that they will, by the end of the narrative, come to know the past behind this future. The traumatic family history at the heart of this narrative is modulated by the original view of the now-grown children. To this point, the frame narrative depicts children that are left to their own devices during the day, a signal that their grandmother is either unable or unwilling to watch over them consistently; the rampancy with which the young Bacadou's traverse communal space is, I suggest, as unsettling

[117] Melo, p. 571.

for contemporary readers as the youths' behavior. The lack of supervision here is worth remembering, as we return to the past to examine Susan's maternal role who painstakingly watches, and watches after, her children. In fact, while the Bacadou children embody an integral aspect of the story, they largely disappear from the narrative as the parent's emotional and economic struggle takes hold. From there, the narrative explores the gendered nuances that come with parenting children with intellectual disability during the nineteenth century. Thus far, I have analyzed the two-page frame narrative that indirectly implies Conrad's conflict while discounting the feminist stakes of my thesis; with the space remaining, I will turn to what I consider to be the heart of this argument: the patriarchal undergirding of Susan's motherly experience, as the mother of intellectually disabled children.

To start, it might be valuable to consider the viewpoint of the dominant patriarchal power in the narrative: Jean-Pierre. From Jean-Pierre's first appearance on the Bacadou farm, the reader is acutely aware that his chief concern is the Bacadou lineage. His wife is an afterthought, scarcely mentioned until the birth of their children. His parents are present only to establish the inevitability of their passing and the legal transfer of the farm from parent to child. Jean is primarily concerned with promoting the Bacadou legacy, particularly as it pertains to his masculinist sense of self. Harrington suggests that Jean "is more concerned with the land, his birthright, than he is concerned with the children themselves".[118] To a certain degree, I agree with Harrington's character analysis. However, in so far as Jean is concerned with how his children reflect upon himself, this chapter pushes against Harrington's suggestion that he is more concerned with his land than with his children. The way in which Conrad interweaves wealth and capital in biopolitical terms should not be overlooked. Rather, this chapter argues that Jean's

[118] Harrington, Ellen Burton. "Suicide, Feminism, and 'the miserable dependence of girls' in 'The Idiots,' 'The Secret Agent', and 'Chance'. *The Conradian,* Vol. 37, No. 2, 2012, p. 21.

material concerns cannot be separated from the genetic insofar as both aspects factor into the longevity of the Bacadou name, and into Jean's sense of himself as a man.

Originally, Jean and Susan look to the birth of their children with hope. In fact, there is such optimism surrounding the newborns that Jean's father claims "they will quarrel over the land",[119] to which Jean scoffs. Instead, Jean looks to the nearer future, before his able-bodied children inevitably take ownership and responsibility over the farm. Instead of foreseeing family conflict, Jean "was happy, and so was Susan, his wife. It was not an ethereal joy welcoming new souls to struggle, perchance to victory. In fourteen years both boys would be a help; and, later on, Jean-Pierre pictured two big sons striding over the land from patch to patch, wringing tribute from the earth beloved and fruitful". There is no "ethereal joy", no intrinsic happiness, in these births. In fact, each parent appears relatively ambivalent about the actual children before them. Both Jean and Susan revel in the birth of their second and third born, having yet perceived them as able-bodied and thus a benefit to the family. Jean foresees his fully-fledged sons "wringing tribute from the Earth", having learned to cultivate the land enough for it to remain Bacadou property. Susan, alternatively, is able to celebrate having escaped the dreaded "unfortunate woman" status that initially encapsulates the entirety of her character. In this sense, the birth of these children provides intrinsic value to each parent. Yet Jean and Susan's hopes are quickly dashed when it becomes apparent that these twins, just as the firstborn, have been born with an intellectual impairment.

Susan expresses moments of emotional ambiguity that emerge from her grieved status as the mother of disabled children. Susan's discontentedness becomes increasingly apparent throughout the narrative but reaches its apex when Jean attempts to sexually assault his wife, leading Susan to kill him with a pair of household scissors. Readers are unlikely to shed a tear

[119] Conrad, p. 46.

over Jean-Pierre's death. As the provider, not of food and safety, but of both physical and emotional violence, Jean-Pierre clarifies his antagonistic position after the diagnosis of his first two children. These 'unhealthy' births exacerbate his obsession over having a healthy male heir. Similarly, modern readers may find it difficult to sympathize with Susan because of certain thoughts and behaviors that iterate her unhappy position as the propagator of disability. There is a certain ableist, even eugenic, quality to her statements worth critiquing. During her escape from her children and her husband's corpse, for instance, Susan wonders to herself: "A Mother!...Who is accursed—I, or the man who is dead? Eh? Tell me. I took care of myself. Do you think I would defy the anger of God and have my house full of those things—that are worse than animals who know the hand that feeds them" (56)? Many readers might immediately balk at the notion that a mother could not love their child without equivocation. Readers might also recoil at Susan's language, referring to her children as "those things…worse than animals". On a superficial level, her reference to "those things" reinforces the children's alienation. Not only are they 'things', but I would also argue that "those" rhetorically pushes the children further away from their mother. "Those" children suggests that the younglings are more of an other, a foreign 'they' disconnected from 'us'. Furthermore, while connections between historical conceptions of intellectual disability and animality are well-documented, it may be difficult to reconcile such connections from a mother's mouth. Susan's claims suggest that she has not experienced the strong emotional bond that many, if not most, mothers document.

However, Susan also alludes to a remarkably significant aspect of mothering intellectual disability with reference to her children's inability to recognize their mother. I want to pause to consider the impact of Susan's claim that her children know not "the hand that feeds them". Again, there is a superficial reading here that is valid, on its own. Susan's role as mother, as caretaker, consumes her existence. Susan may enter the narrative as a woman, but this identity is

quickly replaced by her role as a mother. Sylvia Federici has extensively detailed the capitalistic history of motherhood, arguing that "wombs became public territory, controlled by men and the state, and procreation was directly placed at the service of capitalist accumulation".[120] To be clear, my present argument is not interested in a critique of Capitalism for the sake of critiquing Capitalism. What it is interested in a greater understanding of the intersection of Capital, gender, and disability as these concepts coalesce into a historical representation of child-care for children with intellectual disability. This essay suggests that this gendered form of oppression, filtered through the reality of Victorian Capitalism, can produce alienating effects on mothers, who see their children as both an obstacle toward womanhood and an extension of the self.

Federici is acutely aware of the psychological effects of capitalism on the female bodymind, writing that "by denying women control over their bodies, the state deprived them of the most fundamental condition for physical and psychological integrity and degraded maternity to the status of forced labor" (92). Susan recognizes that her purpose within the Bacadou hierarchy is to provide children. From the outset, the future that Jean-Pierre envisions is clear: His parents will bequeath the farm to him, and he will leave the farm to his son. This generational transfer of property is clumsily foreshadowed when Jean-Pierre returns home from war to claim his inheritance: "the old folks felt a shadow—precursor of the grave—fall upon them finally. The world is to the young".[121] Conrad's overt foreshadowing looks to the future, in which the youth of today take up the mantle of those who came before; of course, the reader is in on the joke here. The Bacadou world, since Jean-Pierre's return, crumbles specifically because of this worldview predicated on heritage. The movement of family capital across generations establishes a reproductive industry bent on the perpetuation of heredity. Such circumstances prioritize the

---

[120] Federici, Sylvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation.* Autonomedia, 2014, p. 89.
[121] Conrad, p. 46.

production of healthy bodies over all, even over Susan's psychological health. In the production of human capital, concerns of mental health fall to the biopolitical wayside.

Still, I find it important to go further and acknowledge the emotional implications of Susan's children possibly not knowing "the hand that feeds them". Susan's third child, for instance, is unable to reciprocate the affection that his mother gives and in fact "never smiled, never spoke; never had a glance of recognition for her in its big black eyes". Her children are unable to comprehend the care that she provides. They are unable to recognize their inherent dependency, unable to recognize the debt to which they owe this individual, whom they are unable to discern from a stranger.

The notion that a mother must inherently love and care for their child has come under criticism from various scholars. Coppelia Kahn, for instance, looks to the ambivalence of the child as a significant aspect, representing the inherently non-reciprocal nature of the relationship between mother and child. Kahn writes that:

> The child's love for the mother doesn't come under the sway of the reality principle, in that the child doesn't at first recognize that the mother exists or has interests apart from it. Separateness at first consists largely of the hard-won recognition that such separateness does exist. Thus the mother, and all women perceived in her shadow, are tainted with the grandiose expectations and bitter disappointments of a necessarily alienated subjectivity.[122]

The mother-child relationship is emotionally unequitable, and this is especially the case for mothers and fathers of children with intellectual disabilities. Implicit in this discussion is the extent to which the child, at this early stage in life, can recognize their separation from their

[122] Kahn, Coppelia. "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd Edition, Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 827.

mother. Andrew Scahill suggests that the personhood of both mother and child are at stake even prior to birth, writing that "as the fetus is given personhood, the maternal body is reduced, dehumanized, and erased: to make the fetus a *person* means to make the mother a *thing*".[123] Dealing, of course, with the still-umbilically connected entity, Scahill's argument reverberates even as the child becomes a separate entity. Lila Hanft suggests, in language significant to this essay's argument, that "this creature which was once part of her but is now separate".[124] Describing the fetus in terms of its literal connection to the mother, both Scahill and Hanft's rhetoric brings to mind contemporary discussions of unborn children and personhood. Yet, Hanft's reference to this now-born child as a 'creature' reifies discussions of the alienation of the motherly body while also reinforcing questions of the child less as a 'person' and more as a 'thing', according to Scahill's own language. The objectification of the child bears significance for a variety of reasons; most notably for this essay the child, in this sense, loses subjectivity in the mother's supposed need for reciprocal affection. The lack of interest, or even attention, that the child expresses toward the mother has a resounding influence on the potential for motherly affection. While the interconnectedness of the mother-child has been well-discussed across feminist discourse, this essay prioritizes the mother and child as separate entities—separate enough, at least, to accommodate discussion of the relationship between the two subjects/objects.

Hanft's analysis of Christina Rossetti's children's poetry is especially productive in this respect, as it foregrounds ideas of maternal ambivalence considering the Victorian preoccupation with maternal altruism. Hanft's examination of Rossetti's "Love me, — I Love You", is particularly evocative, as they write: "The mother's logic, 'love me [because] I love you,'

---

[123] Scahill, Andrew. "Deviled Eggs: Teratogenesis and the Gynecological Gothic in the Cinema of Monstrous Birth". *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in Gothic Literature.* Edited by Ruth Bienstock Anolik, 2010, p. 204.
[124] Hanft, Lila. "The Politics of Maternal Ambivalence in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song*". *Victorian Literature and Culture,* Vol. 19, No. 2, 2001, pp. 219.

establishes the likelihood that the baby does not spontaneously desire the mother; rather, it must be taught to emulate the form and content of mother's desire. From the mother's point of view, what the baby desires, or even *that* the baby desire, cannot be known".[125] In this scene, the lack of the child's subjectivity is on full display. Without cognizance of the request being made, the child is unable to return the desired affection. The child is reified as an object through the impossibility of shared understanding. This objectification, this essay argues, is merely perpetuated through Conrad's "The Idiots", as it represents a family ostensibly founded upon a lack of subjectivity: "in order for the mother to be confirmed in her role as mother, an exchange must take place that completes the circle". Hanft's Marxist language argues that the nonreciprocal nature of the mother-child relationship involves a series of social 'exchanges' that the intellectually disabled child cannot negotiate. The inequity of this relationship has resounding psychological effects on the mother who, in society's view, has transitioned from her previous existence as a woman into her new one as a mother. Still, we expect the mother to perform her labor regardless of her internal existence.

The potential for discomfort in Susan's reactions to her children disavows notions of maternal altruism traditionally represented throughout nineteenth century literature. While this essay focuses on the nineteenth century, the belief that mothers should inherently and absolutely care about and for their child has resonated throughout human history, as Rich writes that "Maternal altruism is the one quality universally approved and supported in women".[126] As one of the singular qualities of femininity traditionally agreed upon, maternal altruism has birthed a long-lasting tradition steeped across cultures and religions. A mother's love for their child has been viewed as a given, profoundly engrained within and across cultures. Kahn even notes its

[125] Hanft, p. 217.
[126] Rich, pp. 215-216.

biblical history, writing that "As mother and only as mother, woman is exonerated of Eve's crime. The mother's assumed capacity for unconditional love, uncontaminated by self-interest or anger, makes her sacred; her pain in childbirth, her self-sacrifice in childraising purify her sexuality".[127] Reaching back to Eve's original sin, Kahn argues that women's maternal role in western history has been biblically foretold in that only through motherhood, through the physical and emotional acts of childbirth and childcare, can woman achieve religious fulfillment. Of course, this singular act of, at least in Susan's case, self-interested salvation betrays the corporeal nature of childrearing by foregoing social and biological complications. Furthermore, Kahn's reading reifies discussions of female identity, with the overt suggestion that the woman who is incapable or unwilling to take the role of mother 'unfortunately' loses a level of personhood. Motherhood, as the historically traditional female occupation, has thereby coerced female subjectivity based on corporeal aspects. The ability to not only give birth, but the expectation to care for the child has, and continues to be, a constraint disguised as capability.

Susan's self-interestedness might initially read as selfish, especially with all the responsibilities that come with being a mother and even more so being the mother of intellectually disabled children who require care at increased intervals. But Susan's lamentation resonates if readers are willing to consider just how fully her children's vulnerability constitutes the sole purpose of Susan's existence. She mourns the unending role of caretaker that comes with mothering certain forms of disability, wretchedly bemoaning "I want to live. To live alone—for a week—for a day. I must explain to them….".[128] It is tempting to decry the self-centered views of a parent. It is even more tempting to decry such views coming from a mother, whose biological and emotional connection to their children is believed to generate some inextricable bond

[127] Kahn, p. 829.
[128] Conrad, p. 61.

between mother and child. The reality of motherhood, even without the caveat of disability, is far from this utopic experience. In *Of Woman Born* Rich shares a sentiment similar to Susan's, writing that: "I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter-hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children" (3). Rich's sentiments are framed in a less taboo manner: She constructs her need for time alone, time away from her role as a mother, in terms that show an awareness of the patriarchal expectation of motherhood. There is no escaping motherhood. So, Rich cannot have time for herself. But, if this time spent on her own is ultimately in service to her children and to her family, such a request for leave of absence might be honored, though chances are slim considering a lack of realistic substitutes. Discourse on motherhood and disability portrays an even more ambiguous reality of maternity than that with which the public is usually confronted.

Much of Susan's ambiguity conveys itself through motherly guilt, with the realization that she might have produced degenerative traits which have passed into her children. The production of labor, as I have discussed alongside Sylvia Federici, can also be rethought alongside Andrew Scahill's notion of the 'gynecological gothic'. I have not yet directly referenced the gothic elements in Conrad's narrative, though I suspect that the summary and psychoanalytical analysis I have provided thus far have invoked the genre. Conrad's brand of realism, permeated with what I read as psychologically Gothic elements, has led me to fixate more on the Uncanny. Still, I would like now to address the gothicization of disability, or idiocy specifically, as it folds over onto the topic of maternity and labor (in a capitalistic sense). Scahill looks at the Cinematic Gothic by examining Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), an especially vivid example of the genre.[129] He suggests that the filmic Gothic identifies the womb

[129] The Gothic has long been intricately connected with parent-child relationships, especially those between the mother and child. Ellen Moers has pointed out that "The material in *Frankenstein* about the abnormal,

as a "contested terrain", often beleaguered by forces both inside and out.[130] Many gothic narratives are driven through themes of supernatural birth, such as *Rosemary's Baby*, in which the titular Rosemary is inseminated by a demonic force.[131] However, this essay looks to Gothic invocations of female bodily autonomy in more true-to-life terms. The notion of pregnancy, as Julia Kristeva points out, already veers into the unspeakable Gothic, noting that: "Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on".[132] While Conrad is invoking Gothic elements, his narrative restrains itself from an outright invocation of the supernatural. But the tradition of pregnancy, both in praxis and in literature, is loaded with significance, even if that significance is unable to be conveyed. The fetus, or graft, that grows is an unknown Other existing in an ambiguous state, while simultaneously and inextricably connecting to the mother and the mother's body. The shared heredity is juxtaposed with a recognition of the physical connection to the mother. The fetus is an impermanent part of this embodiment, a transitory component that feeds off the pregnant body. But, of course, the circumstance of insemination remains a crucial aspect of the gynecological gothic. In tracing a more realist version of this phenomenon, this essay parallels longstanding Gothic tropes established by writers such as Ann Radcliffe, whose *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1764) follows its heroine as she seeks to escape the clutches of her insidious male suitors and captors. In opposition to these traditional tales of female purity escaping the clutches of their brutish suitor-captors, Susan's husband is the most

---

or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie justifies, as much as does its famous monster, Mary Shelley's reference to the novel as 'my hideous progeny'" (99).

[130] Scahill, p. 198.

[131] A more recent thematic example is the Spanish language film *Huesera: The Bone Woman* (2022). The film follows Valeria, who is cursed by an evil spirit, the titular Bone Woman, whose psychic attacks surface when Valeria experiences conflicting emotions about her impending motherhood.

[132] Kristeva, Julia. "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini". *The Portable Kristeva Updated Edition.* Edited by Kelly Oliver, Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 303.

detectable antagonist in Conrad's narrative. Still, his obsessive desire for a healthy heir leads to his own brand of brutishness when he sexually assaults his own wife.[133] The physical invasion of Susan's body, from her husband no less, is reason enough for her ambiguous maternal thoughts. Yet, I argue that Susan's maternal ambiguity emerges partly from her recognition of the congenital nature, the transmissibility, of the impairments that affect her children. In other words: Heredity breeds anxiety.

Rather than utilizing supernatural forces, such as Satan, to perpetuate a gynecological gothic narrative, Conrad invokes late-nineteenth century concerns of genetics. Still, the female body is "corrupted by external forces to create an unnatural monstrosity",[134] but the aggressor is, more horrifyingly, the subject's partner. More concerning, however, is the realization that these "external forces" might be internal, and invisible. I suggest, here, that Scahill's gynecological gothic might be framed in terms of the unknown genealogical qualities housed within one's own body. In the genre of the gothic, these qualities are not one's own, but are inherited from one's predecessors. In Conrad, these qualities are personified into a dark entity that persists beyond the visible, only revealing itself through certain behaviors. Following the birth of their children, the Bacadous clearly evince concerns of their own heredity, concerns that they have been contaminated by their own parentage. The fear of familial taint, however, was not limited to the British family. Rather Scahill suggests that, "When the female body is not invaded from the outside…the unborn child itself is a symptomatic manifestation of societal ills – in which the child, socially overdetermined as the harbinger of a better, brighter future – is refigured as the manifestation of a devolving, polluted futurity". In this case, however, Susan's body is invaded from an external force and her children function as a harbinger of a fallen family specifically

[133] Conrad, p. 56.
[134] Scahill, p. 199.

because the external force (or one of them) is their father. While Conrad's narrative invokes the gynecological gothic, it approaches the concept from a secular Capitalist viewpoint that resonates with scientific leanings at the fin siècle. Susan, or rather, her womb, is the literary extension of a conflict between capital, gender, and disability.

[Self]Surveillance And the Family

The months following the children's births are predicated on visual surveillance, but the subject of this surveillance meanders across the family, as individual members decode the significance of the degenerative traits they see in their kin. Following the birth of their first child, Susan and Jean-Pierre experience an interval of joy, but this is not the "ethereal joy" of new parenthood, or of "welcoming new souls to struggle, perchance to victory".[135] Instead, this effervescence is implicitly situated in the mother and father's adherence to gendered expectations. Both evade the fear of being labelled the "unfortunate" individual whose social stature amongst their peers is predicated upon an understanding of genetic normalcy. Finally, Jean-Pierre looks in on his first-born and asks the question at the heart of both the narrative and this essay: "What's the matter with those children" (47)? This inquiry, directed at his wife sitting nearby, immediately elicits an impassioned sob and an outburst of tears heard across the farm (47). While her reaction is a likely validation of Jean-Pierre's diagnosis, it is also worth mentioning that his rhetorical use of "those" pushes the children away from Jean-Pierre's genealogy, placing the onus of unhealth fully upon Susan's.[136] More marked, the immediacy of Susan's response implies that this question

[135] Conrad, p. 46.
[136] Jean-Pierre's alienating attitude toward his children permeates the narrative, later in this scene he says to Susan that "When they sleep they are like other people's children" (47). What, exactly, this means is unclear. However, I read this as an impotent sort of hopelessness on Jean-Pierre's part. Regardless of his exact meaning, the sentiment rhetorically pushes the children away from a shared genealogy with Jean-Pierre and, perhaps to a lesser extent, his wife.

had been germinating within her own mind; Jean-Pierre's inquiry simply verbalizes what has, to this point, remained unspoken. From this impromptu diagnosis, Susan's maternity is grounded in the visual surveillance of her children: "The mother watched with other eyes; listened with otherwise expectant ears" (48). While still looking after the children in her motherly role, I argue that the purpose of Susan's surveillance shifts to one centered on the children's otherness. Instead of ensuring that her children remain safe and healthy, Susan's vision focuses on symptoms of ID reminiscent of ill health. Susan's daily life is spent visually dissecting her children for that 'monstrous darkness' made manifest so much so that it consumes her life, enveloping her own sense-of-self.

The surveillance of congenital impairments coalesces specifically in the detection of childhood disability, reifying anxieties of individual health and familial degeneration. This chapter's fixation on the uncanny is a function of its interest in congenital childhood impairment. While Freud's interest in disability, as it pertains to the uncanny, was limited to blindness, dismembered limbs, and epilepsy,[137] many scholars have drawn this relationship out, suggesting that the non-disabled often experience conflicting emotions specifically when confronted with a disabled child.[138] Jean-Pierre's misgivings toward his children is apparent across the narrative, though the moments in which he visually engages with them are steeped in hereditary enmity:

> He watched the child, stepping up to the cot with a heavy clang of sabots on the stone floor, and glanced in, along his shoulder, with that indifference which is like a deformity of peasant humanity. Like the earth they master and serve, those men, slow of eye and speech, do not show the inner fire; so that, at last, it becomes a question with them as

[137] Harvey, Clare. "The Uncanny Effect of Disability: Uncomfortable Maternal Love for a Disabled Child". *Contemporary Psychoanalysis,* Vol. 56, No. 1, p 4.
[138] For further reading, see Goodley and Lawthorn "The Disavowal of Uncanny Disabled Children: Why Non-disabled People are so Messed up Around Childhood Disability", *Disability Children's Childhood Studies,* pp. 164-179.

> with the earth, what there is in the core: heat, violence, a force mysterious and terrible—or nothing but a clod, a mass fertile and inert, cold and unfeeling, ready to bear a crop of plants that sustain life or give death.[139]

This passage is ambiguous in subject, an aspect possible because of the hereditary quality of childhood disability. Though the passage opens with a description of Jean-Pierre's visual behavior, the subject of these sentences shifts from "he" to "they". The "they" is expanded upon with reference to "those men, slow of eye and speech". The "they" suggests a plurality yet "those men" could only refer to the Bacadou children in a future sense. If the "they" is, instead, a general reference to 'the idiot' in an archetypical sense, then the ambiguous subjectivity of this passage situates Jean-Pierre in an uncomfortable position, as the connecting branch between his children and "those men". Jean-Pierre's indifference is described "like a deformity of peasant humanity", blending classist and ableist language into a condemnation of the reproduction of labor, for labor's sake. The deeper questions that this surveillance entails, to which it appears Jean-Pierre is not yet prepared to engage, is whether this 'monstrous darkness' embodied here as an inert tumor that promises its own reproduction, has its own morbid corollary within Jean-Pierre's body. Jean-Pierre's hope for his children's health is metaphorized alongside the farmstead. The language here suggests that Jean-Pierre's soil is fertile, but malignant and all the more worrying because of its fertility. My discussion of childhood disability is limited to congenital cases, however. The reality is that impairments can be physical or mental; they can be congenital or acquired; and there is enough scholarship circulating that speaks to an overarching academic interest in further exploring the mixed emotions that come with viewing various embodiments of childhood disability. The means by which impairment is acquired reconfigures the emotive response.

---

[139] Conrad, pp. 47-48.

Jean-Pierre's anger at his children's disabilities, though wrought partly through his concern for the survival of the Bacadou name within the propertied system of capital, is expressed through his gendered identity. While the birth of his first or second disabled child might be explained away, Jean-Pierre becomes expressly concerned, having perceived a pattern in which his own genetics, his own body, is implicated in the impairments of his offspring. After the birth of his third child, Jean-Pierre takes to drinking excessively, often returning home drunk to berate the wife he blames, growling "at the confounded woman who could not rear children that were like anybody else's" (50). In his intoxicated state, Jean-Pierre desperately searches for a rationale to excuse himself from the question of his children's disabilities. His anxieties are expressed, similarly to Susan's, through gendered language, ardently claiming "I am a man….We will see if I can't have children like anybody else…now you mind….They won't be all…all…we see…." (51). In his stupor, Jean-Pierre's rambling trails off. While his intention in this passage may not be explicitly apparent, Jean-Pierre exposes his dominant concerns. Firstly, Jean-Pierre implicates his masculinity, which he believes could be the cause of his childrens' disabilities. While the feminization of disability has been well-explored by numerous scholars,[140] Jean's statement is intriguing for its parallel to Susan's fear of becoming an "unfortunate woman". There is an overt concern that Jean is unfortunate in possibly not being "like anybody else". The mystery of inheritance, a mystery unable to be truly 'solved' in this case, pervades through the finale, so it can never be accurately discerned if Jean-Pierre is an "unfortunate" man in the way he fears. Regardless, Jean's adamant claim that "he is a man" echoes with impotency, though he is not privy to the hollowness of his claim. His belief in his own manhood, coupled with the belief that

[140] For more on the conflict between masculinity and disability, see Shuttleworth, Russel, Nikki Wedgwood, and Nathan J. Wilson. "The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity" *Man and Masculinities*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2012, p. 174-195.

this manhood has an influence upon the health of his children, leads Jean-Pierre to believe that Susan is the only plausible explanation for his children's disabilities.

Jean-Pierre's conceptualization of his own children is based in relational terms of normalcy, a relativity founded on his perception of surrounding families. Throughout the narrative, Jean-Pierre's belief that he is entitled to 'normal' children becomes increasingly clear. In the given passage, for instance, Jean's claim that "We will see if I can't have children like anybody else" raises both questions and concerns. Firstly, there is an implicitly threatening nature in the certainty with which Jean-Pierre speaks. Hearing Jean's proclamation, Susan protests. He answers by striking her on the head with enough force to knock her into the bottom of the cart. Claiming that "we will see", Jean-Pierre suggests an inability to know the future while simultaneously foreshadowing sexual violence toward his wife, indicating that he will do whatever he can to acquire children "like anyone else". His reference to other children reifies the Bacadou family as a fount of gossip for the surrounding community, situating the family as an isolated island amongst a sea of normalcy.

Gendered expectations placed on each parent, reinforced through their engagement with the surrounding community, generate much of the narrative's conflict. Here, I do not mean to affirm Jean-Pierre's egregious behavior but rather intend to draw out valid gendered expectations and the ways in which each parent performs their expected role. Jean, as the one who most commonly leaves the farmstead, is the first to become aware of the rumors surrounding his family: "He had returned late from the market, where he had overheard (not for the first time) whispers behind his back. He revolved the words in his mind as he drove back. 'Simple! Both of them….Never any use!...Well! May be, may be. One must see" (47). The people in the market evaluate the Bacadou youths' mental capacity and immediately read the apparent deficiency as a broken cog in an otherwise perfect system of Capital. Labeling the children as 'simple', defined

in the *OED* as "characterized by a lack of knowledge or education" and as "stupid" and "foolish",[141] the community connects the children's mental capacity to a capacity for labor, suggesting that they will "Never [be of] any use". Here, as is often the case, 'value' or 'use' entails a capacity for labor. Rather, the subsequent births of children with ID envision a future in which the Bacadou family name will no longer be relevant. As the family structure is clarified with each birth, the family social status comes under greater scrutiny.

Though the children are initially referred to as 'simple' with clear reference to their intellectual impairment, the labor-based implications behind the statement connect intelligence with labor. So, while the children might be simple in terms of intelligence, they are also simple in terms of their "humble birth or social status".[142] This is an important distinction considering references to the wealth and influence the family originally retained (46).[143] Disability, and intellectual disability in particular, has been utilized as a signifier and perpetuator of class in literature. While this is in keeping with studies that show a connection between fiscal insecurity and intellectual disability,[144] representations frequently offer disability as a precursor to familial demise in biological and economic terms that bely the praxis of genetics and care. In this case, as in similar representations of intellectual disability such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), impairment is viewed in familial-relational terms. Intellectual impairment is utilized to

---

[141] "Simple, n1.4.a, n1.4b." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2019, oed.com/dictionary/simple_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#22534981. Accessed 3 March 2024.
[142] "Simple, n1.3.a, n1.4b." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2019, oed.com/dictionary/simple_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#22534981. Accessed 31 October 2024.
[143] Conrad, p. 46.
[144] Bunga, Divija et al. conducted a study in India that addressed the various effects that having a child with intellectual disability can have on a family. Their research showed a correlation between financial insecurity and the presence of intellectual disability within families. 58.87% of the families surveyed "faced financial problems because of ID children in the family" (153). Such results likely reflect lost revenue from parents being unable to work due to caring for their child, or the expenses incurred through institutional forms of care, such as group homes. Bunga, Divija et al. "Children with Intellectual Disability, Impact on Caregivers: A Cross-Sectional Study". *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*. Vol 36., No. 2, 2020, p. 153.

accentuate a family's economic and social downturn; such narratives invoke degeneration theory, popularized at the fin de siècle, as explanations of social decline. The Bacadou name is consistently compared with other unnamed families, or at least this is the impression that Conrad's narration implies. Both parents are deeply concerned with their own gendered and classed status in relation to the community. Such fears, however, lead to internal strife within the family.

While Jean-Pierre goes out of his way to blame his wife for the state of his children, this is likely due to the repressed belief that he is also, possibly, the conduit through which degenerative traits have passed. So, while there is an implicit concern over the passage of wealth and property, Conrad's narrative also deals with the generational transfer of status during an era specifically obsessed with fitness and the type of biological conditions being transferred. The surrounding community appears acutely aware of the potential downfall of the Bacadou family. Of course, familial demise is not an uncommon trope in the Gothic and Sonya Loftis, in "The Autistic Gothic", argues that "The Gothic is often concerned with familial decay, focusing on the 'failed home…as the site of terror'".[145] Indeed, as evidenced by the beginning of the narrative (taking place in the future), the Bacadou homestead has become something of an oddity, a source of rapt disquietude amongst the surrounding populace. Rumors abound as the narrator explains that the fragmented story is pieced together from various figures, including an "emaciated and sceptical old fellow" whose story is "confirmed and completed" later by other inhabitants of the region.[146] The family history has become myth: a colloquial tale of misfortune told in fragments, through whispers.

---

[145] Loftis, Sonya Freeman. "The Autistic Gothic: *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Glass Menagerie,* and *The Sound and the Fury*". *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum.* Indiana University Press, 2015, p. 89.
[146] Conrad, pp. 44, 45.

As concern of hereditary disability increases across the narrative, the narrative emphasizes the hereditary suspicion levied at different members of the family. Jean-Pierre's father, who is seemingly the first to address the children's impairment, is suspected of retaining certain traits of mental deficiency, a possible reason for his dazed reaction. He is referred to by the narrator as the "childish grandfather" and "feeble old fellow" (48). Perhaps more tellingly, it is later explained that "only once, move either by affection or by the sense of proprieties, he attempted to nurse the youngest". He lifts the child up "clicked his tongue at him" and sets the child back down "with a gaze senile and worried". Furthermore, when introduced to his second grandchildren, the twins, the elder Bacadou "stared at them with a fixed gaze" and muttered "something like: 'It's too much'" (46). The narrator goes on to question the statement, asking "whether he meant too much happiness, or simply commented upon the number of his descendants, it is impossible to say".

The grandfather's unintelligible statements notwithstanding, his tendency towards passive visual behavior implies a dual diagnosis: "He looked offended—as far as his old wooden face could express anything; and for days afterwards could be seen, almost any time of the day, sitting at the gate, with his nose over his knees, a pipe between his gums, and gathered up into a kind of raging concentrated sulkiness" (46). His minimal facial expressions expose the child to the disdain of his social gaze, yet this passage also gestures toward the grandfather's subsequent reflective behavior. This is a pivotal moment in the narrative, a moment in which invisible disability is visualized, openly transforming the child into an object of the uncanny, fulfilling Freud's definition as "nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed".[147] From the outset, I would like to suggest that this reaction is not a response to the child's disability, but instead correlates to a

[147] Freud, p. 148.

recognition of hereditary guilt. The subject of this Freudian 'reveal' is not the child, but the grandfather, whose genetic makeup presents itself to him through the visage of his grandchild. The grandfather's recognition is a reminder of Lennard Davis's mantra that everyone will eventually become disabled; but Conrad's depiction of a congenital condition interrogates the manner with which the visible threat of disability resonates through genealogy.

Of course, Jean-Pierre's grandfather is representative of only one half of the family tree, and the story narrativizes the increased genetic suspicion that each side of the family holds toward the other. Susan's mother, Madame Levaille, is industrious and matronly. She has even been described as "a caricature of the bourgeois individualist…concerned with her reputation and financial success" who has little time for the mental health concerns of her daughter.[148] Levaille, the widowed grandmother who ultimately cares for the children after Jean-Pierre and Susan's deaths, provides an unrealistic image of the productive female bodymind against which Susan is juxtaposed. However, as the matriarch of the family, Levaille also functions as a conduit between previous generations and the new. Due to her familial positionality, Levaille provides the reader with genealogical insight, alluding to the possibility of hereditary taint from her late husband. The narrator notes that "Her husband had been 'deranged in his head' for a few years before he died, and now she began to suspect her daughter was going mad" (54). The concern of failing intellectual prowess in old age, in both grandfather figures, offers some validity in tracing the family's health through multiple generations.[149] The narrative goes no further than this generation and it is also quite likely that the Bacadou lineage ceases at this juncture, fulfilling the eugenic promise undergirding the narrative.

---

[148] Harrington, p. 64.
[149] For more on heredity and feeble-mindedness, see Henry Goddard Holmes' *The Kallikak Family* (1912).

Instead, part of this narration focuses on past generations: Susan and Jean's grandfathers both exhibit symptoms of a declining mental faculty; while this is a natural development, contemporary psychiatric discourse suggested the possibility that such conditions might entail other forms of hereditary degeneration. Degeneracy, defined by Augustin Morel as "*a morbid deviation from an original type*"[150]*,* reconsiders disability, race, sexual orientation, and other modes of Othering along hereditary lines. This "original type", Morel concludes, is beset by the most insignificant of "a morbid deviation" or "transmissible elements" that might be nearly undetectable in this individual. However, traces of these deviating elements persist through this individual's genealogy so that "anyone bearing in him the germs becomes more and more incapable of fulfilling his functions in the world". This incremental degradation of the family, I argue, is the central focus of Conrad's narrative. Conrad's repeated references to this extended family's genealogy reify the narrative's concern with hereditary taint. Degeneration provides an umbrella term for discussion of Conrad's hereditary interest, but while we can attribute the idea of degeneration to Augustin Morel, Darwin alludes to the concept in *The Origin of Species.* Tied to his discussion of variability, Darwin posits that "There may be truly said to be a constant struggle going on between, on the one hand, the tendency to reversion to a less modified state, as well as an innate tendency to further variability of all kinds, and, on the other hand, the power of steady selection to keep the breed true".[151] The eugenic themes in this passage bely Darwin's ambiguity around natural selection. Morel, Nordau, and Conrad are less ambiguous in their assessments. Regardless of how each individual viewed degeneration theory, the multifarious ways in which the overarching idea was transmitted and popularized made it a legitimate national and social concern. The anxiety surrounding mental disability, or really any form of deviation from that

[150] Qtd. On Nordau, p. 9.
[151] Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species*. Penguin Classics, 2009, p. 143

"original type", was a very real fear, especially within families. The appearance of degenerative qualities in one's own children, then, is equal parts understandable and worrisome.

Conclusion

> *"I strongly support the availability of IVF for couples who are trying to have a precious baby. What Could be more Beautiful or Better Than That?"*[152]
>
> *-Donald Trump*

I have laid out a historicization of intelligence and the uncanny, in conjunction with notions of maternity and childhood, that focuses on the nineteenth century fin de siècle, but I want to emphasize that we have become no less conflicted about congenital childhood disability. This discomfort parallels recent technological advancements in the health industry that come with their own set of ethical questions. Medical advancements, especially prenatal screening, have been a source of contention amongst Disability advocates for years because of the practice's links to eugenics, at least in practice. That parent[s] can now screen the fetus of their child for 'abnormalities' presages the possibility of an abortive procedure, perpetuating life based on a notion of normalcy or what is considered good health. This is a difficult choice for any person to make. Women do not, despite any suggestion to the contrary, wait until after the child is born to terminate the pregnancy. Any suggestion otherwise is a flagrant falsehood that besmirches an entire sex and belies an unwillingness to consider the reality of pregnancy and maternity as lived experiences that come with complicated emotions and problems. I have explored just one of the ways in which motherhood can be complicated by the realities of health and genetics. Furthermore, I have revealed that, while conflicting emotions are common and even natural in

---

[152] Trump, Donald. [@teamtrump]. (April 8 2024) *Under my leadership, the Republican Party will always support the creation of strong, thriving, and healthy American Families.* [Video Attached][Post]. X. https://x.com/TeamTrump/status/1777315152959815883

mothers, such confliction has been hyperbolized to demonize women who deemphasize motherhood in their own lives. And while I have focused on the Victorian period, this is a transhistorical claim.

The 2024 Presidential race is evidence enough of this. In his second successful bid for the presidency, Donald Trump expressed nativist concerns around the United States' declining childbirth rates that resonated with his followers. This rhetoric emerged in the aftermath of Roe V. Wade's dissolution and paralleled discussions of In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) as conservative pundits and politicians found themselves situated in a rhetorically difficult situation, defending the termination of Roe V. Wade while reconciling this defense with far-right religious condemnation of IVF. Some GOP representatives tried to navigate the space between being pro-life and pro-IVF while representing many constituents who firmly stood against the latter practice, a scientific procedure considered unnatural by certain religious affiliations. Trump's vacillating viewpoint on the abortion debate has been well-documented in the media; it fluctuated as he fought to secure the far-right evangelical demographic while appealing to the broader public, which overwhelmingly favored a reinstatement of women's health rights.

To combat the popularity of abortion rights, Trump's tactics differed from time to time, but he often returned to rhetorical condemnation of women who seek abortions, posting a video on X (formally known as Twitter) that claimed: "It must be remembered that the Democrats are the radical ones on this position because they support abortion up to and even beyond the ninth month. The concept of having an abortion in the later months and even execution after the birth—and that's exactly what it is—the baby is born, the baby is executed after birth is unacceptable and almost everyone agrees with that". Trump's statements have always been difficult to prove, and he rarely bothers doing so; still these statements were repeatedly contested, and Trump was able to provide no evidence of their validity. What I want to point out is the manner with which Trump

seeks to demonize women, assumedly just Democrat women, who seek an abortive procedure. Short of life-threatening situations (and even then) conservatives routinely delegitimize the health or economic stakes by which some women validate their decision to abort a pregnancy. The argument that a woman might choose to not have a baby because she wants to be a woman and not a mother certainly does not mesh with Trump's particular brand of populist conservatism. The lack of context in Trump's ludicrous hypothetical suggests that women are seeking to terminate their child, even after birth, without cause. What could be more horrible than that?

Like fin de siècle Britain, the MAGA movement is predicated on the notion that the nation is in decline. Trump's nationalistic rhetoric brusquely claims that "We want more babies to be born in America. We want more babies. We need them. We need them". Paradoxically, Trump's language often marches headlong into the eugenic, and he has repeatedly discussed 'racehorse theory', the practice of breeding horses for specific traits, along with references to intelligence within his own family, namely his late uncle John Trump, a former Physicist and professor at MIT.[153] The belief in eugenics is alive and well in the U.S., and I think it likely that we will see and hear more eugenic rhetoric in the coming years of the Trump presidency, especially considering his promise to conduct the largest deportation in history. I say this because, while Trump proudly touts his dissolution of Roe V. Wade and broadcasts hopefulness for the "precious baby" or the "beautiful baby" that can be birthed now that it is not threatened by menacing democratic women, I think it also obvious that these babies will not come from immigrants who Trump believes are "poisoning the blood of our country". The eugenic language is overt, here. Such rhetoric is emblematic of 'Great Replacement Theory', a far-right conspiracy that pushes the notion that white bodies are being systematically replaced by persons of color.

---

[153] Sorkin, Amy Davidson. "Donald Trump's Nuclear Uncle". *The New Yorker.* April 8, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/donald-trumps-nuclear-uncle. Accessed November 8, 2024

Furthermore, Trump unintentionally invokes Cesaré Lombroso, who argued that criminality was a genetic given and thus racially encoded; Lombroso famously defended his opinions through phrenology, the decidedly racist and ableist pseudoscientific practice of measuring the cranium to discern intellectual capacity. Trump's rhetoric, delivered in an interview with a conservative radio host, echoes these outdated and racist sentiments: "You know, now a murderer, I believe this, it's in their genes. And we got a lot of bad genes in our country now". While Trump's campaign sought to clean up this rhetoric by arguing that Trump was solely focusing on "murderers", his racist and ablest rhetoric is well-documented, claiming in his first presidential announcement speech that immigrants from Latin American countries are "bringing drugs, they are bringing crime, their rapists, and some, I assume, are good people".[154] He has continued espousing such rhetoric since. His continual references to criminals and lunatics who are ostensibly pouring over the southern border into the U.S. brings what has been, and what should be, historical discourse into the contemporary period. Such nativist rhetoric clarifies that the bodies, or babies, imagined in Trump's speeches and interviews are coded by race and disability. I find a lamentable irony in the dissolution of Roe V. Wade. The termination of abortion rights suggests that the U.S. will see a population boom of disabled bodyminds, as parents can no longer terminate fetuses due to mental impairment. This, of course, will further breed inequality, especially during an era of increased conservatism stresses the limitation of social welfare programs.

Despite the possible eugenic connections to prenatal screening and abortion, women deserve the right to an abortion. I say this despite having an intellectually disabled individual in my family. No, I say this *because* I have a disabled individual in my family. The nuances involved in caring for an intellectually disabled individual for the entirety of their life, with the

---

[154] "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech" *Time.* June 16, 2015. https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/

realization that their child will, *hopefully*, outlive them, necessitates a lifelong commitment, likely (and hopefully) from multiple parties. This is the ongoing discussion in my own family, as my older sister is set to take over legal guardianship of our oldest sibling, our brother. She will be his legal guardian for the rest of their lives. This is the image of our family. It is a messy portrait of a non-traditional family structure born out of necessity. This is the reality for my sister who, even as a child, knew that this responsibility would fall to her someday. Somehow, as the youngest, I managed to stay blissfully unaware of these realities for far too long. Many studies iterate the importance of parental support and co-parenting when it comes to raising a child with ASD and intellectual disability, which speaks to the nuanced problems that come with the phenomenon.[155] What I would like to point out, that I think these studies neglect, is that these 'co-parents' are just that: parents. Being the parent of a child with intellectual disability can become an all-encompassing identity, depending on the family's circumstances. My sister has known for much of her life that she will eventually be a de-facto parent, but I desperately hope that this is not an all-encompassing identity, especially considering the inherent lack of choice involved in these circumstances. We are also a lucky family, coming from relative economic comfort and a two-parent household that which at least enabled some flexibility in allocating care. As is the case in many families, care would occasionally be allocated to the more mentally able. This cannot be said for all families and special attention should be directed at vulnerable families, like those with a single parent or those experiencing economic hardship. Considering all this, then, there is some validity to Jean-Pierre's insistence that he and Susan should have a healthy child, if for no other reason than that there is someone to care for the most vulnerable of their children after the parents pass on. Instead, this duty is left to Madame Levaille; however, I would argue against relying on

[155] Norlin, David and M. Broberg. "Parents of children with and without intellectual disability: couple relationship and individual wellbeing". *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research,* Vol. 57, No. 6, 2013, p. 554.

grandparents as a long-term solution to caring for children with mental impairments.[156] Just as the narrative points out, Levaille will eventually pass away and the children will be left to the whims of the State, likely shelved in an institution somewhere until their death, a supposedly "compassionate" outcome, according to Conrad.

To conclude, I want to iterate the point that the lives of intellectually disabled individuals have value. I do not think this should need to be said, but there is evidence that this is not a universal statement and so I will be as direct as possible. I have talked about Donald Trump's eugenic statements, but one telling narrative comes from his nephew, Fred Trump, whose son, William was born with disabilities that require lifelong care. In an interview with CNN, Fred explains how Donald provided the funds to send William to a group home, where he could receive the care he required. It is worth pointing out that such institutions are not feasible for many similar families in the U.S., a point that Fred's interview explicitly discusses. The most shocking facet of this interview is Fred's recollection of a phone call he had with Donald regarding the funds for William's care. In response to Fred's request for these funds, Donald allegedly said: "He doesn't recognize you. Let him die and move down to Florida".[157] The callousness of these words, spoken about someone within one's own family, is difficult for me to comprehend. It is easier, however, if one considers the manner with which eugenic ideology has permeated the present, especially through MAGA rhetoric. Perhaps, if Donald were to look deep within himself, he might see that 'monstrous darkness' to which the rest of the world is privy.

---

[156] J.D. Vance received significant backlash for his views on childcare for families experiencing economic hardship. Vance suggested that "One of the ways you might be able to relieve a little bit of pressure on families who are paying so much for daycare is maybe grandma or grandpa wants to help out a little bit more". Vance's comments display an inability to consider the variety of family structures and other factors that impede a family's ability to provide lasting care for children with ID. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBR6FurPXIw. September 4, 2024. Accessed on November 5, 2024.

[157] "'Let him die': Trump's nephew shares what he says Trump told him when he asked for help with his son". *CNN.* https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/04/politics/video/fred-trump-financial-help-medical-expenses-bts-digvid. Accessed November 5, 2024.

Race and Intelligence in Stephen Crane's "The Monster"

This chapter focuses on 19C understandings of intelligence as a racialized construct. However, such racialization of intelligence endures today and was especially visible in the epithets that Donald Trump threw at his 2024 presidential opponent, Kamala Harris (who identifies as Black and Indian). Trump repeatedly hurled insults at his opponent, denouncing her as "slow", "low IQ", and "mentally impaired". This chapter argues that the linguistic slippage between the realm of 'unintelligence' and outright 'intellectual impairment' is consistently racialized in the U.S. Such beliefs are woven into the fabric of modern American Nationalism—a movement that discourages hyphenates in favor of a clear-cut 'American' identity. Such a valuation of pure American 'whiteness', I argue, is indicative of the racialized 19C constructions of intelligence that remain today. This allows Trump to go from calling Harris "slow" to "mentally impaired", repositioning her according to a hierarchized imagination of intelligence that presupposes Harris' degenerated intelligence. Intelligence for Trump is a measure of whiteness, of the imbrication of white culture and education in an individual. Even in 2024, Trump put this rhetorical racialization of intelligence to MAGA voters, who awarded him with thunderous applause.

The very notion of intellectual disability suggests that there are those that have intelligence and those that do not: there is ability and there is disability, fitness and 'idiocy'. The narratorial surveillance of disability often culminates in diagnosis, a telltale signifier of difference. This word or phrase signals to the reader and, depending on the mode of diegesis, to other characters in the narrative, that there is a form of mental or bodily divergence that necessitates or warrants a shift in behavior. Disability (intellectual or otherwise) also resituates ability; without an awareness of disability, the able-bodyminded individual can have no relative sense of ability. So, these moments of literary diagnosis perform various services for the reader.

They showcase both mental and bodily diversity and also reconfigure bodyminds along various social strata. I argue that the permeation of clinical terminology into lay understanding has resulted in attenuated language that both approaches and alienates the concept of intellectual disability, and those affected by it. Whether 'idiot', 'imbecile', 'retard', etc., the act of diagnosis of ID creates a rhetorical situation predicated on precarious conceptualizations. Instances in which we are told that we are seeing intellectual disability, or its historical signifiers, play into the bifurcation of intelligence through audiovisual imagery, a major point of emphasis in my chapter on Joseph Conrad.

This chapter, then, is interested in constructions of intellectual disability as they have been diluted by lay understandings and representations. Terminology related to the study of intellectual disability has been consistently filtered through representation of race, this is especially visible in the aftermath of American chattel slavery. The crux of my argument comes from the tenuous parsing of medical and lay language. While 'idiocy' was a medical term in the 19C, it was also more colloquially used, as terms related to intellectual disability commonly are. I use this terminological ambiguity as a starting point for a discussion of 'intelligence' and representation in the nineteenth century.

19C racial constructions of intelligence remain today, inherent in both public discourse and in the systemic "overcriminalization of 'undeserving' Black Americans" whose "lack of access to curative institutions often forced them into punitive ones".[158] The continued criminalization of Black Americans' perceived mental and intellectual deficiency is especially apparent in the case of Jordan Neely, who was killed by ex-marine Daniel Penny in a New York subway on May 1, 2023. Penny, who is white, was later acquitted of all charges. Right-wing

[158] Edwards-Grossi, Élodie and Christopher D.E. Willoughby. "Slavery and Its Afterlives in US Psychiatry" *Public Health Then & Now*, Vol. 114, No. 53, 2024 p. S251.

media outlets pushed Penny as a Good Samaritan protecting his fellow passengers from a dangerous and "bothersome street performer notorious in New York City for strong-arming money from pliable tourists".[159] In an article from *The American* Conservative, Declan Leary points out that the 30-year-old Neely was "chronically homeless" before the writer reaches the ominous conclusion that "Men are not meant to live as Jordan Neely lived". Leary's article opens by emphasizing Neely's police record with an abundance of hollow pathos: "Forty-two." Giving space for that number to sink in, he continues: "That is how many times Jordan Neely was arrested before he was killed during one of his dangerous episodes: forty-two." Leary's rhetorical maneuver suggests that Neely did not deserve a forty-third chance, despite the mental health quality of his "dangerous episodes". The point is instead that Neely's episodes were "dangerous". Leary's analysis *almost* gets at the systemic racism that drives this issue but stops short, instead positing with sweeping melodrama that "the chaos of liberalism ends in death".

Leary's article effectively sums up numerous conservative talking points about race, mental health/ability, and liberalism; it also inadvertently showcases the pervasion of 'social death', the "institutionalized marginality" endemic to slavery,[160] as it is literalized onto Neely's body. Neely's troubled existence, in which "he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (5). Rung through the American healthcare and judicial systems, the man that went into this system emerged from the other side labeled a vagrant and a criminal.

Institutionalized and released time and time again, the American healthcare system failed Neely, undoubtedly. But the failure did not cease there, as his continued psychiatric health problems were treated as criminal offenses. Jordan Neely's murder reifies the need to re-examine

---

[159] Leary, Declan. "Was It for This the Clay Grew Tall?: Jordan Neely was a victim, but not in the way progressive activists would have you believe". *The American Conservative,* 2023, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/was-it-for-this-the-clay-grew-tall/

[160] Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press, 2018, p. 46.

the manner with which race and mental disability intertwine in public discourse. Neely's forty-two arrests demonstrate the continued dehumanizing criminalization of psychiatric conditions in the United Stated, especially as they are directed and the unhoused and people of color; Leary's article alludes to the way in which Neely's "bothersome" public presence became a community nuisance. The way that Neely's unhoused status is described necessitates a discussion of the 19C "Ugly Laws", most poignantly discussed in Susan Schweik's *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public.* The book locates a collection of laws passed in 1881 Chicago,[161] designed to "abolish all street obstruction" but which were targeted at individuals considered an "unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places" (Qtd. on 1-2). Leary wants to drop Neely's death at the feet of liberalism, but he also seems resigned to the man's death because "men" do not live like Neely did—criminals do. Neely's death received numerous media treatments, but the right-wing argument I have traced here reifies my chapter's connection to the 19C through Leary's evaluation of Neely's appearance and behavior. The impropriety of Neely's behavior, judged improper by Daniel Penny, ultimately resulted in his death. But I would argue that Neely's social death had likely occurred years before, as he was cycled through a broken machine time and time again which manufactured the man he was at the time of his death.

"The Monster" is most directly concerned with race during Reconstruction. Published in 1898, the novella is the first of Crane's many Whilomville-based short stories. This fictional town is based on Port Jervis, New York, where Crane lived as a child. The narrative fixates on the Trescott family and their loyal coachman, Henry Johnson. The family is overseen by Dr. Trescott, a respected physician within the local community. Trescott's paternalistic relationship with his

[161] Schweik notes that the first apparent instance of 'Ugly Laws' appear in San Francisco, in 1867. Schweik, Susan. *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public.* New York University Press, 2010, p. 3.

son, Jimmie, creates an interesting dynamic between Trescott, Jimmie, and Henry. Jimmie, after a mild scolding from his father, seeks Henry who often provides friendly consolation. The pair's friendship, though uneven, provides context for the rest of the narrative. Late one night, when Dr. Trescott has gone to see a patient and Henry has visited town to court his sweetheart Bella Farragut, a fire breaks out in the Trescott house. As the townspeople gather near the conflagration, they discover that Jimmie is still in the burning home. At this realization, Henry is suddenly seen heroically dashing into the fire; he finds Jimmie in his room and, as the fire begins to overtake parts of the house, flees through the doctor's laboratory with Jimmie cradled in his arms. Succumbing to smoke inhalation, Henry faints. He collapses under a table where a bottle of acid explodes from the heat, causing the concoction to drip down onto Henry's unconscious face. Meanwhile, Dr. Trescott returns home and upon hearing what has transpired, similarly rushes inside, finds Jimmie, and returns him to safety outside. Eventually, Henry is also saved, though the gathered crowd is visibly affected by Henry's now disfigured face. The rest of the narrative explores the aftermath of Trescott's decision to support Henry as recompense for saving Jimmie. The public, however, is overwhelmingly uncomfortable with Henry's disfigurement and the Trescotts are soon alienated from their neighbors as a result of their continued support for Henry. Many critics have noted how, despite Henry being the titular monster, the narrative's moral imperative is placed in the white Ned Trescott. From here, the story becomes a question of morality, race, and disability as Trescott must decide whether the alienation that his family receives is worth his continuing to support Henry. This has led to the frequently asked question: Is the monster Henry, or is it the townspeople who turn their backs on him? The story ends by implying that Trescott will give in to the public and send Henry away, though it is unclear where. By the end of the narrative, Henry has become the titular 'monster', devoid of humanity and personhood, seemingly lacking the intellectual capacity to understand his place in society.

Stephen Crane's "The Monster" aestheticizes the aftermath of American chattel slavery with a narrative focused on the physical and mental erasure of a black man. The story narrativizes the racialization of intelligence along socio-biological lines; though slavery had ostensibly ended, biological determinism that emerged out of British and American racist sciences made way for eugenic and segregationist practices. These practices were reinforced by American racial scientists like Samuel George Morton (1799-1851) who measured the skulls of various demographics as a means of hierarchizing the races according to intelligence and Charles Davenport (1866-1944) who famously argued for the sterilization of races he deemed inferior, and who continued to support eugenic philosophy even after the rise of Nazism and the horrors of Nazi Eugenics. Nazi racism owed much of its scientific philosophy to the "commonsense" eugenic practices of the U.S.[162] Hitler famously praised the "commonsense" practices at Ellis Island, an intense choreography of Eugenic surveillance that refused immigrants "if they are in a bad state of health" or belonged to undesirable races; the eugenic philosophies exuded at Ellis Island were precisely the "principles…on which we wish to ground the People's State". Crane's narrative challenges the racism of this period, orienting a narrative entirely around the erasure of the Black man during Reconstruction; at the same time, "Crane often appears blatantly racist, utilizing the sort of negative racial stereotyping common to minstrel shows and pro-slavery accounts of the Old South".[163] Perhaps well-intentioned, Crane's narrative falls backward into harmful imaginations of the Black man's mental experience, primarily through the white person's understanding of 'racial trauma', that undercuts an otherwise more nuanced depiction of race and social hierarchy.

---

[162] Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf.* Translated by James Murphy, Gutenberg.net, 2002.
[163] Cleman, John. "Blunders of Virtue: The Problem of Race in Stephen Crane's 'The Monster'". *American Literary Realism,* Vol. 34, No. 2, 2002, pp. 120.

With this final chapter, I have decided to cross the Atlantic to examine how intelligence, intellectual disability, and race were constructed alongside each other in the U.S. at the turn of the century. I realize that this is an ambitious proposal but consider it important to recognize the globalization of discourse on intellectual disability as it pertains to the specific historiography of the United States. My move to the western hemisphere is an attempt at examining the specific racial politics that influence discussions of intelligence during the late nineteenth century. While racism wove itself into British science and literature, this chapter attends to the racial dynamics following the signing of the 14th amendment in 1866. Saidiya Hartman points out the new reality of "burdened individuality", in which emancipated people were caught in a liminal space of personhood: "being freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject".[164] The formal act of emancipation, while officially freeing enslaved people, also created an interval in which race was socially re-configured, culminating in Jim Crow segregation in the 1870s.[165]

In this chapter, I look at Stephen Crane's naturalist narrative as it attempts to capture the racial politics of the time period. In doing so, however, I argue that Crane enters a larger discussion about the ways in which intelligence is represented, especially along racial lines. Crane's story exudes a progressive attitude in the way it attempts to humanize its Black characters, while at the same time falling victim to racial stereotyping indicative of the racism of Reconstruction era America. Considering the sociopolitical ramifications of chattel slavery, which reduced human beings into property, the subsequent period provides a chance for Crane to

---

[164] Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 117.
[165] For more on how socioeconomic status influenced racialization during Reconstruction, see Adukia, Anjali, Richard Hornbeck, Daniel Keniston, and Benjamin Lualdi. "The Social Construction of Race During Reconstruction". National Bureau of Economic Research, 2025.

explore the internality and thought processes of persons of color. But Crane's white perspective clearly informs his view of Black internality. Crane's narrative invokes the idea of racial trauma as an infantilizing and paralyzing memory, its emergence in the narrative initiates a complete failure in cognitive ability and perception. In this moment of the narrative, Black internality is replaced by an obsession with past trauma—foregoing a possibility of present action. Crane's story suggests that the memory of past trauma limits present-day ability.

Intelligence and 'Whiteness'

'Intelligence' is a fluid historical term. My historical analysis is related to constructions of idiocy in that idiocy is not just concerned with ideas of 'intelligence' but also suggests the significance of an individual's "culture" and "education".[166] "Idiocy", and intelligence vicariously, are socially constructed. This also suggests, as my chapter will detail, that intelligence is racially constructed as well. My analysis looks to theories of idiocy as a racial characteristic, partly enabled because of these caveats to idiocy that distance it from contemporary notions of intellectual disability. 'Culture' and 'education' are highly racialized components of intelligence, and the status quo. Such racial baggage infers that Black Americans were at risk of unintelligence—of being dumb or stupid—but were also at risk of being labeled racially inferior through a devaluation of mental characteristics. The valuation of 'whiteness', critical race theory informs us, is baked into American systems of oppression. Culture and education became barometers by which demographics could be deemed intellectually inferior. The valuation of certain culture or education, as it functions according to racial components,

[166] McDonagh, Patrick, C.F. Goodey and Tim Stainton. "Introduction: the emergent critical history of intellectual disability". *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History: 1200-1900.* Edited by Patrick McDonagh, Manchester University Press, 2018, p. 3.

medicalizes the Black bodymind and enables the diagnosis of conditions that would otherwise remain un-surveilled, and unspoken.

So far, my project has focused on instances of 'idiocy', in which some form of diagnosis, from *someone*, has occurred. My focus on the historical term has limited the project to texts that specifically reference 'idiocy' or a specific 'idiot'. This methodology presupposes that whoever performs this diagnosis has the medical or experiential knowledge to do so. It also assumes that the author is attempting a representation in good faith, which is not a given. How can different 'idiot' characters can exist under this umbrella term considering the political motivations, often racial, gendered, or classed, so often at the heart of such representations? How often have I been swayed to see 'idiocy' in a specific way because the plot of the narrative requires such an image? How has this shifted my modern understanding of intelligence? Because of these methodological limitations, I will attempt to do something different with this chapter. Instead, this chapter deconstructs the 19C conceptualization of the 'idiot' by appraising who and where such narratorial diagnoses come from. I argue that "The Monster" portrays a more complex view of intelligence in the 19C by circumventing narratorial diagnoses. Instead, intelligence is constructed via racial hierarchization, in which black and white bodyminds are put in proximity with each other, thereby resisting classification. Put simply: Intelligence is perpetuated through racially charged language and social dynamics, as evidenced in the small rural town of Whilomville

While other authors I have surveyed refer to idiocy directly, according to their imaginations of it, Crane engages with the topic of intelligence less implicitly, destabilizing its ostensibly binary quality in modernist fashion. Without diagnosis, I argue that Crane invokes a discussion of intellectual disability through a relativity of intelligence and race. Jason Coats makes a similar argument for Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. He argues that the narrator's

dogged adherence to racial pseudosciences of the period frequently blurs between diegetic and non-diegetic, making it "distinctly unhelpful and, indeed, unreliable".[167] This is partly because some characters similarly espouse the theories of Lombroso and Nordau; the problem is that one of these characters, The Professor, is diagnosed as a degenerate by the narrator, creating a circuitous paradox in which "He and the narrator cannot both be the true adherents to science" (659). If the Professor is a degenerate, then any diagnoses that he provides are immediately suspect. This, superficially, presupposes that the reader must choose who is the truer adherent to Lombrosian criminology: the Professor or the narrator. But, Coats suggests instead that this is a modernist strategy designed to make the reader "jettison the truth claims of both voices and comprehensive authoritativeness as such" (659). The reader must, of course, be aware of the racist historical discourse to which Conrad makes his narrator subscribe, lest they experience an "impoverished narrative" (663). Yet Coats claims that Conrad provides "more than enough interpretive gaps to suggest that the sensitive reader look for ways of rejecting the narrator's science and thinking for himself" (663). The racist science that drives much of the characterization of *The Secret Agent* is not so overt in Crane's narrative, despite sharing similar intervals of publication and scientific understanding. The interpretive gaps create more inquiries than interpretations.

Instead of being overloaded with the discourse of racist pseudosciences, characterization occurs through relations between characters. In fact, 'idiot' crops up three times throughout "The Monster", each time in its lay context and with reference to a person exhibiting emotional distress or excitement. I suggest this is a move in the modernist direction, as Crane's implementation of scientific terminology is both racialized and deracialized throughout the narrative, destabilizing

[167] Coats, Jason M. "Unreliable Heterodiegesis and Scientific Racism in Conrad's *Secret Agent*". *Modernism/modernity,* Vol. 20, No. 4, 2013, p. 646.

readerly attempts at generating meaning. Two of these three references to 'idiocy' come from white speakers and speak of white subjects. Meanwhile, the term is used more strategically when the speaker is a white judge and the subject is an "idiot" black woman whose "silly" friends will no longer visit her for fear of encountering Henry.[168] The judge's reaction portrays Williams's wife as the hysteric, unable to control her rampant emotions. The judge's reaction belies the fact that the other two instances of 'idiot' in the story are in reference to white individuals who have seemingly lost control of their emotions.[169] The result of both Conrad and Crane's narration is the "practical modernist payoff" of suspending the "reader's credulity from all stable assessments of natural racial, ethnic, and criminal identity" (659). Modernism sought to decouple literature from realism and focus more on narratorial experimentation and subjectivity. In both Conrad and Crane, each narrator deliberately establishes and destabilizes readerly understanding of racial positionality. While Conrad directly invokes the authority of pseudosciences, which are then overturned by narratorial racism, Crane's narration is coupled with linguistic inconsistencies that destabilize readerly understanding. The unreliability endemic in these narratives of racial science and hierarchization reinforce the inherent instability in attempts at representing the relationship between people of different races in the late 19C United States.

Though omnisciently narrated, Crane's narrative is deliberately focalized through ambiguity. This is clear from the outset when Jimmie is described at play. The story opens: "Little

---

[168] Crane, p. 304.

[169] The first instance occurs in the barbershop, where the white patrons and barber are briefly distracted by Henry's eclectic appearance. One annoyed patron calls the group "idiots" and beckons the barber back to his duty. The group's interest in Henry's striking appearance seems unwarranted. The second instance is directed at Jake Wynter, a local white man and the father of Sara Wynter. When Henry escapes the Williams's home, he passes by Sara Wynter's birthday party, supposedly frightening several of the children (though this is disputed via rumors). Jake threatens to have Dr. Trescott jailed for allowing Henry to roam freely, to which Trescott expostulates "The idiot! What in the name of wonder could he have me arrested for" (317)?

Jim was, for the time, engine Number 36, and he was making the run between Syracuse and Rochester. He was fourteen minutes behind time, and the throttle was wide open" (277). Now, clearly Crane is metaphorizing childhood play. Jimmie is not a steam engine and Jimmie knows this, assumedly; but Crane's phrasing suggests that the imaginative quality of Jimmie's play enables him to fully embed himself in the performance, so that, in his imagination, 'Jimmie' *is* Engine 36. My point is that Crane's aesthetic decisions, in this case to metaphorize Jimmie's act of play, establish narratological discontinuity that destabilizes readerly comprehension. At various points throughout the narrative, the narrator makes various claims that come from ambiguous sources. It is often unclear who, exactly, is speaking or thinking the words on the page. By opening the narrative in this manner, Crane establishes a certain level of narratorial intelligibility. From the start, the reader must recognize and contend with Crane's modernist act of play.

The apparent protagonist of the narrative, Henry, is first introduced to the reader in relation to Jimmie, who is described as Henry's mental counterpart. After being chastised by his father, Jimmie looks for a space to hide when he happens upon Henry, who busies himself by cleaning the wheel of the Trescott buggy. When he sees Jimmie approaching, Henry "grinned fraternally…These two were pals. In regard to almost everything in life they seemed to have minds precisely alike" (279). Crane makes it a point to intertwine Jimmie and Henry in both brotherly affection and mental ability. Brothers, pals, and mental equivalents: Crane condenses a relationship down to a series of relational forms that superficially oversimplifies the reality of this relationship. That these two could have "minds precisely alike" seems an overtly shocking statement, considering the era from which this narrative emerges. And yet, Crane lays out a sequence of memories by which the reader can attempt to dissect this relationship and the individuals who compose it. Apparently, this is not the first time that Jimmie has found Henry at a time of guilt or shame, as the two frequently commiserate on their mutual relationships to the

intimidating image of Dr. Trescott. To assuage Jimmie's guilt, Henry, "with the elasticity of his race, could usually provide a sin to place himself on a footing with the disgraced one" (279). However, Crane makes it a point to emphasize the nuance in Henry and Jimmie's relationship; at other times, Henry would bully Jimmie "most virtuously, preaching with assurance the precepts of the doctor's creed, and point out to Jimmie all his abominations". In this case, Crane's racial hierarchy shifts slightly, as Henry lectures Jimmie about his misdeeds, and thereby establishes a moral superiority over the boy. Henry invokes the words of Dr. Trescott as a means of establishing his own authority over Jimmie. Though Henry is often referred to as the protagonist of this narrative, he more so serves as an object around which other characters can situate themselves. The entire narrative, especially after Henry's disfigurement that causes his erasure from the narrative as a person, is focused on Dr. Trescott's championing of Henry's cause. In Jimmie's case, Henry explains how he and Jimmie are on similar footing, at least with reference to the doctor; in one case, he explains how he had forgotten to pack the hitching-strap prior to a ride in the buggy, for which he was reprimanded by Dr. Trescott, assumedly in similar fashion to what the reader just witnessed between the Dr. and his son.[170] At least in this case, Henry provides value to Jimmie by lowering himself, or being lowered, to the equivalent of a child.[171]

Bringing in Dr. Trescott, as the third corner of this tripartite relationship, complicates Henry and Jimmie's relationship further.[172] Jimmie is able to find solace in Henry's companionship. But this solace emerges as a direct result of his relationship with his father. Ned

---

[170] Crane, p. 279.

[171] Jimmie also provides Henry with a level of dignity, as Crane explains during this initial interaction, in which Henry is washing a wagon-wheel: "Johnson could…display all the dignity of a man whose duty it was to protect Jimmie from a splashing. 'Look out, boy! look out! You done gwi' spile yer pants. I raikon your mommer don't 'low this foolishness, she know it. I ain't gwi' have you round yere spilin' yer pants, an' have Mis' Trescott light on me pressen'ly. 'Deed I ain't.' He spoke with an air of great irritation, but he was not annoyed at all. This tone was merely a part of his importance" (280).

[172] A recurring view of Dr. Trescott as a celestial body is shared by both Jimmie and Henry. Crane writes that "Henry personally conducted the moon during the splendid journeys through the country roads, where farms spread on all sides, with sheep, cows, and other marvels abounding" (279-280).

Trescott, despite having such an outsized effect on these two characters, does not appear to bear any malevolence toward his son or stable hand.[173] There is no singular antagonist in this novella. Rather, Trescott appears to genuinely care about both his son, which is to be expected, and Henry, which is not (or at least is not a given). As I believe it is already somewhat apparent, Jimmie and Henry both appear subordinate to Trescott in similar ways. Both Jimmie and Henry are reprimanded, one for the broken flower and the other for the forgotten hitching-strap, though it cannot be said if the mode of these reprimands are the same. To this point, in codifying Jimmie and Henry's relationship alongside this third party, the manner in which each is reprimanded plays a part in how they see each other. For instance, Crane writes that "Whenever Henry dwelt for a time in sackcloth, Jimmie did not patronize him at all. This was a justice of his age, his condition. He did not know" (279). Jimmie's ignorance, when it comes to the nuances of racial relations during this period is exemplified numerous times. His is characterized largely by naiveté, especially when it comes to race during the reconstruction era. Interestingly enough, Crane's narrator sees Jimmie's ignorance as a "justice"; his inability or unwillingness to recapitulate racist behaviors comes from his place as a child, ignorant and therefore innocent. Jimmie does not see the racial significance of the sackcloth, a textile-based affirmation of Henry's position in Whilomville. He does not appear to see any significance socially constructed around race, despite the sackcloth that serves as an occasional reminder, for Henry.

Jimmie's naiveté further situates his relationship with Henry, whose employment requires him to perform certain tasks beyond Jimmie's understanding. His status as the coachman establishes Henry's position within the Trescott homestead; lording over the stables, Henry

[173] At the same time, there is also the possibility that Dr. Trescott corporally punishes his son, according to Henry positing the inquiry "Your pop done wallop yer, didn't he" (280)? Jimmie categorically denies this, and the reader has not seen any instance of physical punishment; still the inquiry suggests that this is not unheard of. At the same time, depending on the extent of the punishment, this may not have been considered an indecent act of authority, especially at the time.

appears before Jimmie with an aura of ability. Jimmie is often captivated by Henry's work, or at least his description of the work, despite the humble quality of the tasks. Apparently, Henry receives some level of enjoyment by explaining his duties, since "Jimmie was invariably overcome with reverence when he was told how beautifully a harness was polished or a horse groomed. Henry explained in each detail of this kind with unction, procuring great joy from the child's admiration" (280). Jimmie does not have any conception of the beauty that Henry notes, but instead immediately takes Henry at his word. Henry claims the work is beautiful, and Jimmie agrees without hesitation, without thought. What Henry claims, surely, must be true. Clearly, Henry knows the effect that he has on the boy, and he seems to take pleasure in their relationship, if at least partly because of the respectability it affords him. In fact, Henry has apparently mastered the ability to "seduce" Jimmie with his tasks, as displayed in their first meeting. The recently disgraced Jimmie approaches Henry yet is not immediately lured into conversation or engagement with his pal. In fact, it is only when Henry deliberately spins the buggy wheel, causing water to whorl through the air that Jimmie takes notice "with an interest that slowly consumed the remembrance of a late disgrace" (280). With this display, Jimmie's interest is suddenly arrested, having emerged from his shameful malaise. This new visual supplants the "remembrance" of Jimmie's interaction with his father. Crane appears to be representing a form of relations that influence memory and cognitive function. Again, Jimmie is not an 'idiot', we cannot accurately discern where he is on a developmental scale, but he does appear to struggle with memory especially during moments of trauma or stress. Henry, alternatively, appears to be a person with whom Jimmie feels more at ease, and therefore more cognizant, even though Henry periodically takes advantage of the boy's naivete, for his own amusement.

The first logical step in this argument is to rationalize connecting Jimmie Trescott, and vicariously Henry, to the idea of 'intelligence'. Jimmie is never referred to as an idiot; his

intelligence is never outright questioned by the narrator or any other character in the narrative. I am not suggesting that Jimmie is intellectually disabled, nor do I think he is an 'idiot' according to medical denotations at the time, which define idiocy as "a specific infirmity of the cranio-spinal axis" produced by nutrition deficiencies in utero and shortly after birth with which "the idiot moves, feels, understands, wills, but imperfectly"; the idiot "does nothing, thinks nothing, cares for nothing (extreme cases)".[174] This especially stodgy definition asserts that idiocy is merely a medical condition, eschewing other lay definitions that infuses the concept with social and racial meaning. Instead, this chapter finds moments of mental tumult that Jimmie experiences which reinforces his connection to Henry, who eventually experiences his own moment of mental shock coded as a return of racial trauma. To be fair, Jimmie is a child and the only hint toward his age is that he is a part of the "baby class" at his local school (321). In his analysis of Crane, Stanley Wertheim draws attention to the way in which Henry and Jimmie's relationship is depicted, purporting that "the *Zeitgeist* racist image" is juxtaposed with Henry's heroics during the Trescott fire.[175] However, in his argument, Wertheim claims that "Henry and the infant Jimmie are the best of friends", a claim reinforced with Crane's curious statement regarding the similarity of their minds (69). I challenge Wertheim's reference to Jimmie as an "infant". Because I am engaging in concepts of intelligence, a baseline intellectual expectation is required to establish a deficiency or disability. If Henry and Jimmie "have minds precisely alike", then Jimmie's developmental age matters. Crane does not provide this to the reader. Wertheim's reference to Jimmie's infancy is likely speculation and, I argue, emblematic of Crane's ambiguous narration. Though a member of the "baby" class, it is unlikely that the class would be populated with

[174] Seguin, p. 29.
[175] Wertheim, Stanley. "Unraveling the Humanist: Stephen Crane and Ethnic Minorities". *American Literary Realism*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1998, p. 69.

children in infancy. More likely, the term is a derogatory reference from upperclassmen to lowerclassmen. Still, Jimmie's exact age is unknown, resulting in an ambiguity of themes.

How the reader interprets Jimmie's age reconfigures whether the story is engaging with an intersectional discussion of disability and race or is more exclusively concerned with racial politics. Apart from the manner with which his parents treat him, Jimmie's age is never expanded upon and thus the reader has scant information with which to gauge Jimmie's intellectual and educational development. I argue this has a modernist effect on readers, as they search for meaning without satisfaction. I further argue this partly due to the two instances of emotional or mental strain in which Jimmie is unable to verbally express himself. This does not inherently suggest that Jimmie has an intellectual disability. But the inclusion of two distinct moments of unintelligibility or incommunicability in the span of the novella connects Jimmie with Henry, who experiences his own moments of mental stagnation in connection with his race. The uncomfortable mental proximity, as suggested outright by the narrator and coupled with scenes of similar mental stagnation, are a fundamental component of the story that show some connection between the mental ability of a white child and a black man. These moments are interwoven within the Jimmie-Henry dynamic, and so it is worth first pondering just how similar in mind these two characters are.

Crane is rather bold in asserting that a white character, albeit a boy of questionable age, has the same mental capacity as a person of color. Such a framework brings notions of whiteness and blackness within proximity of each other at a period of American history preoccupied with retaining separateness. Taking place after the passage of the fourteenth amendment, Crane's narrative is set during a moment fraught with the recent memory of former enslavement. Individuals like Henry may no longer be slaves, but Crane's narrative also does not parse the demographics of Whilomville, beyond a reference to a black suburb with the unfortunately named

'Watermelon Alley', where Henry's lover lives. Across the nineteenth century, race emerged as a barometer for intelligence, evidenced by contemporary racial science that calculated and quantified the vague concept of 'intelligence' based on external features. Crane is surely cognizant of the tightrope upon which he balances, as he continues relating this friendship to the reader:

> Of course there were points of emphatic divergence. For instance, it was plain from Henry's talk that he was a very handsome negro, and he was known to be a light, a weight, and an eminence in the suburb of the town, where lived the larger number of the negroes, and obviously this glory was over Jimmie's horizon; but he vaguely appreciated it and paid deference to Henry for it mainly because Henry appreciated it and deferred to himself. (279)

This passage contains several aspects that deserve attention. Firstly, Henry's physical and social existence stand out. Henry is "very handsome", though this attractiveness is relativized with the fact that he is also a "negro". He also holds "weight" and "eminence", though again these qualities are referenced in comparison with the "negroes" in town. This racial relativity will be a recurring theme throughout this chapter, considering the manner with which I see race and disability interacting to establish a connection between Henry and Jimmie, while maintaining Henry's (and the Trescotts') positionality amongst the people of Whilomville, a fair number of which are people of color. The reader's imagination of Whilomville, especially its racial demographics, becomes important as social lines are drawn regarding Henry's disfigurement. The 'town' as a collective unit of individual people and families, slowly dissolves racial differences throughout the story; disability (or disfigurement, in this case) becomes the dividing line between the collective 'I' or 'We' and the disabled Other, who is also a person of color. But this does not mean that Henry's race is insignificant. Instead, Henry's racial identity and visual disability

intertwine to depict Crane's titular Monster, a Frankensteinian Monster for nineteenth-century America.[176]

But Crane's references to Jimmie establish questions of his status within this community through deliberate narratorial ambiguity. Crane's third-person limited omniscient narrator asserts that Henry is seen by his peers as a particularly distinguished and socially adept individual, but "obviously this glory was over Jimmie's horizon". The reader can interpret this a few different ways, and I argue that this multiplicity of interpretive possibility emerges partly from the narrator's purposeful opacity. I see this passage iterating two possible alternatives. The first possibility assumes these are the thoughts of the narrator while the second assumes these are Jimmie's internal thoughts being passed off as narratorial fact. If the reader takes the former reading, then immediate questions of Jimmie's faculties come into question. The narrator refers to Henry's manner of speech as an indicator of social stature or "glory". His eloquence resituates Henry from being a "handsome negro" to being a "light", a "weight" and an "eminence"; each of these terms compounds to further elevate Henry amongst his peers. And yet, such eminence is "obviously" beyond Jimmie; the reason for this is not at all obvious, despite Crane's assertion. Why is Jimmie, especially as the son of a well-to-do professional, unable to surpass the horizons of his father's coachman? If, alternatively, the latter is true, the story gets more complicated with an attempt at analyzing Jimmie's internality, with limited knowledge pertaining to his mental experience. If we read this passage as an interpretation of Jimmie's internality, then questions arise surrounding Jimmie's ability to understand social and racial dynamics. Yet, Jimmie later exhibits his capacity for social engagement when he and his peers make a game of daring each other to touch the Trescottian monster. So, Jimmie "obviously" recognizes a deficiency in himself

[176] Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women.* Doubleday & Company, 1976, p. 98.

because he can see this proficiency in Henry, yet the parameters of this proficiency are unclear. In this passage, the narrator explains Jimmie and Henry's relationship, but the reader is likely left with more questions than answers. The dynamics that so "obviously" speak to the "emphatic divergence" between these characters is not at all clear.

Similarly, the reader is unable to know if the social differences between he and Henry are 'obvious' to Jimmie or if they are 'obvious' to the narrator, who is likely read as the white, able-bodied, male subject. The other narratives discussed in the project run the gamut in terms of omniscience: *Barnaby Rudge* is also third-person limited omniscient; "Janet Fisher" is third person omniscient, as is "The Idiots". A modernist mode of narration, limited omniscience drastically affects readerly experience, especially when it comes to stories that incorporate the nonnormative subjectivities of individuals with intellectual disabilities (like Janet or the Bacadou children). Such narration enables an omniscience with all but the most riveting components of the story: the internality of the 'idiot'. Both narratives depict people with intellectual disabilities, but withhold any semblance of internal dialogue, reducing the subjects' sentience and personhood. This latter tale, it should be noted, has a semblance of limitation in its omniscient narration by way of the frame, pieced together through rumors and speculation. Crane's narrative similarly utilizes rumors, especially when Henry absconds from the Williams' home and terrorizes Whilomville through a series of unconfirmed vignettes. The mode of narration for each of these is significant, and each author has surely chosen their mode for a specific reason. This may be to make the narrative more intelligible, but some authors may choose to wade in uncertainty, to the annoyance of their readers. This frustration, I argue, is an integral aspect of Crane's narrative. To resist this frustration is to read an impoverished narrative, according to Coats. Certainly, the scientific racism that contextualizes Conrad's narrative, provides valuable information around which the reader can situate the plot. Crane's narrator does not try to help the reader with racist

pseudosciences, which if we take Coats at their word, would not actually be helpful. Instead, Crane leaves interpretive gaps that are supposedly obvious to the reader, but in fact, are not obvious in the slightest. Maybe Crane is just a poor writer, unable to provide necessary context for the reader to follow his narrative. Or maybe Crane is deliberately seeking to alienate the reader; perhaps by suggesting that we *should* know something, he makes us feel as though we have forgotten something.

Jimmie's pattern of inexpressibility is displayed from the outset, when he repeatedly tries and fails to explain how, in his act of playing 'train', he damages one of his father's flowers. The narrator explains how, while Jimmie plays, his father painstakingly manicures his lawn. The extent to which Dr. Trescott labors over the lawn suggests that the lawn, and the flowerbed by extension, is a point of contention for the Trescotts; but this is not overtly stated. So, when Jimmie, having snapped the stem of a daisy, exhibits distress at the prospect of telling his father, the reader may not immediately understand the stakes of the situation. It is a broken flower, after all; how much can it really matter?[177] Still, Jimmie slowly ambles over to Dr. Trescott, kicking tufts of grass on the way, waylaying his inevitable confession. The guilt conveyed in this scene is a helpful barometer for Jimmie's understanding of social dynamics; he is aware of his act of impropriety, slight thought it may be. But when he tries to explain to his father what happened, nothing comes out of his mouth: he cannot find the words. All he can muster is a gesture toward the flowerbed and an emphatic "There" (279)! Dr. Trescott is unable to understand, causing

[177] Later in the narrative, a group of men inside the barbershop sees Henry walking down the street dressed up to visit his lover, Bella Farragut. There is a blatant sense of voyeuristic racism in the manner with which the group catcalls Henry, referring to him as "a taisy", and "the biggest dude in town". The sense is that the group finds it unorthodox or inappropriate for a black man to dress "like that" and that Henry "wants to make a front" (282). The metaphor that Crane works with here suggests that Jimmie is responsible for Henry's disfigurement, having broken a peony at the outset of the story.

Jimmie to search his mind, in vain, for the words to more clearly explain himself. But he cannot construct the thought and instead, "After a period of silence, during which the child may have undergone a severe mental tumult, he raised his finger and repeated his former word—"There!"' (278). Having gained no new information with which he can make sense of this insignificant situation, Dr. Trescott asks again for Jimmie to explain, and the two walk to the flowerbed so Jimmie can direct his father's attention more deliberately. This is a remarkably quotidian scene, yet Crane decides to open his narrative with this curious display of linguistic incommunicability.

Now, issues of language have long plagued discourse on intellectual disability, and I will outright claim that language, and linguistic ability, is not a guarantor of intelligence, just as a lack of linguistic ability is not a signifier of deficient intelligence. Why, though, does Crane's opening scene fixate so much on Jimmie's inability to convey the idea of a broken flower to his father? Stress is a plausible answer, as "It seemed that the importance of the whole thing had taken away the boy's vocabulary. He could only reiterate, "There!" (278). Perhaps Jimmie is concerned what his father will do or say. His awareness of the power dynamics involved in this relationship influences how efficiently Jimmie can convey his ideas. The reader, at this early juncture, has no knowledge of the relationships that populate this narrative. So, perhaps this father-son relationship is an especially contentious one. Maybe Jimmie has reason to be fearful of his father. But this does not quite seem to be the case, and across the narrative Dr. Trescott's love for his son is rather apparent, though their day-to-day engagement is not immediately visible for the reader. Still, there is no evidence of abuse or neglect. I am especially interested in the way that the "importance" of Jimmie's topic, the broken flower, steals his vocabulary, or so it seems. The flower is not important, even to Dr. Trescott, I assume. But to Jimmie he has made a grave mistake and now must inform the all-powerful Dr. Trescott, his father. We cannot say for certain how often Jimmie is stricken with such inexpressibility. Besides, this is just one instance of

cognitive blockage. We all have moments of brief inexpressibility, especially during instances of stress. These moments of dissonance proliferate more and more with the increase in stimuli. These are natural iterations of the postmodern experience. But Crane drops contextual clues to imply that this is more than just schizophrenic overstimulation. To discern a possible reason, I will turn to the second sequence of Jimmie's inexpressibility, which brings him into closer proximity with Henry and should serve as an anchor point for a continuation of my analysis.

Henry, Memory, and Imagined Racial Trauma

Crane's narrative exemplifies the effacement of the Black body, bringing my analysis of cognition into a more direct discussion of racial politics in the U.S. While I have largely focused on Henry's thought processes, as a correlative to Jimmie's, the central plot of "The Monster" is interested in visuals, and disfigurement. *The Ugly Laws* looks to forms of visual difference as a form of disability, considering the social challenges that can constitute such conditions. For the sake of this chapter, Schweik points out the racial components of 'ugliness', in part arguing that "the ugly laws are part of the story of segregation and of profiling in the United States" as the laws explained "who could be where, who would be isolated and excluded, who had to be watched, whose comfort mattered" (184). The notion of being 'ugly' in public is at the heart of Crane's narrative, post-Trescott fire, as Henry's place in the well-lit Whilomville is put into question. At one point in the narrative, Henry causes a "riot" and is chased by a "big crowd of townspeople, who hurl stones at him (316). I want to point out that the composition of this crowd is in question. Having just come from Watermelon alley, Henry scares a young Irish girl, causing a mob reaction. The immediate reading is that this is a crowd of white passersby. But, based on the reactions from the Williamses, there is also the distinct possibility that the crowd chasing Henry is not composed entirely of white bodies. Race, in this instance, appears to have been

effaced in favor of a more common social taboo: ugliness and disfigurement. The ugly laws speak to the "conflation of disability, socioeconomic status, and race" (5). Aimed first-and-foremost at the practice of begging, these laws situated race and disability alongside concerns of poverty, at a time in which entirely new demographics were introduced to the American public: the free black man, woman, and child. What we see in Crane's narration is an effacement, a literal dissolution of racial identity, that culminates, at least in this scene, with a possible breakdown of racial lines as all Whilomvillians come together to stone their once beloved Henry. But Henry's race remains a dominant aspect of the narrative and his disability, as the socially constructed anxiety around disfigurement is largely predicated on his previous existence as a black man.

When the Trescott house is set ablaze, Crane connects Jimmie and Henry through their behavioral responses to this traumatic event. After he bravely dashes into the house, Henry ascends to the second floor and finds Jimmie, sitting in his bed: "The boy had apparently just been aroused by the noise. He sat in his bed, his lips apart, his eyes wide, while upon his little white-robed figure played caressingly the light from the fire" (290). The child's response here, a mixture of terror and shock, is not surprising. Yet, the reader is unable to know how long this response has been elicited, since "apparently" Jimmie had just been awakened. One might even argue that the sudden sight of Henry, "this apparition of his pal, a terror stricken negro", might be a partial cause for Jimmie's response, described as though it "were a case of kidnaping by a dreadful robber chief" (290). Wrapping Jimmie up in his blanket, Henry finds the pair cut off from his point of entry. The conflagration, at this point engulfing much of the first floor, leaves the two without a clear exit. At this point, Jimmie's senses return to him as he cries out for his mother. Overcome with emotion, Jimmie lets out a "gorgeous bawl, which resembled the expression of a calf's deepest terror" (290). It is not entirely clear why, at this juncture, Jimmie's emotions burst forth. Likely, Jimmie was in shock, stunned by the circumstances of his waking

and it is only after a brief interval that his senses return to him. I pair this sequence with the opening scene merely to point out these two instances of apparent incognition, both of which appear predicated on stress, and possibly even trauma. Jimmie, however, is a young child and so these responses to such stimuli seem situationally logical.

As the scene progresses, Henry's antagonistic relationship with the fire becomes a point of emphasis, as Crane metaphorizes the inferno to fit with Henry's colloquial memory of oppression. In an overtly heavy-handed manner, Crane aestheticizes the Trescott fire in in racially traumatic way, writing that, in losing his will to escape the fire, Henry "was submitting, submitting because of his fathers, bending his mind in a most perfect slavery to this conflagration" (290). There are few direct references to slavery throughout Crane's narrative, but the shadow of America's sins resonate in Crane's narration of racial relations in the reconstruction era. Perhaps because of this, or because of the sentiment itself, this reference to Henry's "fathers" and the "bending" of their minds in subjugation stands out. The rhetorical move that Crane makes, by conflating this fire with the practice of slavery, is admittedly shocking, considering the more subtle manner with which Crane speaks to race and racism in the rest of the narrative, primarily through characterization and dialogue. Of course, a superficial reading of the narrative sees race essentially excised from the narrative after the fire, as a discussion of disfigurement and disability takes over. But this striking passage bears considering because of the manner with which Henry submits, and then liberates himself, from this captivity.

During this scene, Henry's cognitive ability appears to vacillate according to his emotive response. Seeing the fire, especially as the narrator portrays it, as an overwhelming force of oppression, Henry soon despairs. So when Henry reaches the top of the stairs and looks down into the blaze that has become the first floor of the Trescott home, "He cried out then in a howl that resembled Jimmie's former achievement" (290). Jimmie, who had gained enough of his senses to

wail in an animalistic tone of sheer terror, is mirrored in Henry's own animalistic howling. While the reader, like Henry, is most concerned with Jimmie's safety, this does not appear to be Crane's sole concern. Instead, we see Crane conflating Jimmie's and Henry's responses to this traumatic event; obviously, however, Jimmie and Henry's mental experiences are predicated on different memories. Jimmie does not have as much cultural capital with which to make sense of this event, though I would argue that even if he were older his thought process would still be markedly different from Henry's for obvious reasons. In his desperation, Henry succumbs to the fire. Realizing that the exits to the house are all blocked, he concedes control of the situation. In narratorial time, this concession probably lasts about a moment, but the reader cannot actually discern how long these sequences of unthought last.

Henry moves between moments of fear and despair that exemplify his cognitive pattern during a moment of trauma. Put simply, when Henry suddenly realizes that there is another way out, he performs a critical engagement with his environment. In their terror, both Jimmie and Henry are animalized—conveying the extent to which they are cut off from internal engagement, and instead are consigned to the external world. But suddenly, Henry recalls a private staircase connecting the second story with Dr. Trescott's lab on the first floor. Henry appears to be familiar enough with the Trescott home that he can find Jimmie's room, despite the permeation of fire and smoke, so Henry's inability to recall an entire staircase, private or not, seems somewhat farfetched. Perhaps anticipating this, Crane writes that "he had been perfectly familiar with it, but his confusion had destroyed the memory of it" (291). It is worth asking the extent to which Henry would have had access to this staircase, considering it connects a bedroom and Dr. Trescott's laboratory. Henry's confusion, or the inability to remember this passage, could partly be a signal of his status amongst this family. Crane never says outright how often Henry ventures inside the house, as his job largely relegates him to the stables. So, the reader does not have enough

information to discern whether or not Henry should be able to adjust to the situation and find this second escape route. What I find important here is the manner with which this sudden resurgence of memory reinvigorates Henry's "momentary apathy". In continuing to relay this scene, Crane's narrator provides some helpful internal dialogue, explaining that "In his sudden momentary apathy there had been little that resembled fear, but now, as a way of safety came to him, the old frantic terror caught him. He was no longer creature to the flames, and he was afraid of the battle with them. It was a singular and swift set of alternations in which he feared twice without submission, and submitted once without fear" (291). The sudden mental indolence that strikes Henry here is bound up in racial memory. Fear provides an impetus, a reason to continue fighting the flames. That "old frantic terror" speaks to a racial history borne out of fear; Crane suggests that this frantic terror, a terror based in desperation, is a key to internal survival. This is not a terror based in the master-slave relationship, though certainly the power dynamics at play produces the specific iteration of this terror.

Instead, I suggest that Crane might be referring to another pernicious impetus of fear that arises from the act of enslavement: dehumanization and social death. Having been transformed into a howling "creature to the flames", Henry's humanity is reinstituted with the return of his fear. When he reaches the laboratory, which has now blossomed into bursts of chemically-concocted blues, purples, and oranges, he lets out another cry. As opposed to the first wail, this emotional outburst is devoid of connection to Jimmie and is instead conveyed entirely in racial terms as "the negro wail that had in it the sadness of the swamps" (291). This is not, however, a wail of reconciliation, I do not think; rather, this wail seems more a recognition of the path forward, an awareness of the difficulty and pain already experienced, but which promises more torment. Following this wail, Henry rushes across the laboratory, fire lashing out like a panther at his ankles in a curious metaphorical inversion (291). Explosions wrack the laboratory and Henry

is knocked unconscious and the unmoving bundle rolls under a window. The chemicals atop a table burst from their receptacles and ooze onto Henry's unconscious face, resulting in the disfigurement that concerns the rest of the narrative. Dr. Trescott, finally, returns home and bursts into the house; he immediately finds Jimmie and whisks him to safety. An unknown interval later, an unnamed brakeman from the nearby railway, hearing that there is still a person inside, ventures in and "brought forth a thing which he laid on the grass" (294). Though superficially, Henry's physical body is in danger, this scene also points frequently to the psychic turmoil he undergoes. This mental process, I suggest, is connected to other instances of non-thought that Crane puts forth. These moments of mental fragmentation appear predicated on instances of authority and, in Henry's case, chattel slavery. Following this scene, the narrative pivots to reflect the most direct implications of the fire: Henry's disfigurement. But it is also striking that, despite being "pals", these are the last moments in the novella in which Henry and Jimmie's share any sort of intimacy and, in fact, Jimmie later uses Henry's disfigurement when he and his peers play a game of "touch the monster". Jimmie appears to have completely forgotten that this 'monster' is his dear friend and pal, Henry. Following the fire, Henry's body is so badly burned that he becomes unrecognizable to those he is the closest to. And while the physical burns dominate the town's response to Henry's accident, he also undergoes a mental shift that is far more ambiguous.

Henry becomes the titular "Monster", and a source of anxiety for the town largely because of his physical appearance, but I would like to draw attention to Henry's behavior as further explanation for his alienation. Henry does not appear conscious of his physical transformation. Henry's newfound mental condition is difficult to discern, as it appears largely predicated on a general lack of situational awareness. After he recovers from his burns, Henry is taken to Alek Williams' home. Dr. Trescott arranges for Henry to live in the same home as Alek, Alek's wife, and their children, a living situation that soon becomes untenable when the family

actually sees Henry's disfigurement. But Henry does not appear cognizant of his effect on those around him, speaking to the extent of the fire's psychic damage upon him. In fact, his actions following the fire suggest a loss of ability, and he is described as "a man who walked slowly and carefully, as if he were learning" (302). While trudging toward the Williams' home, Trescott explains the situation, talking Henry through who and how he will be cared for, assumedly for the remainder of his days. Trescott goes through the nuances of this set up, explaining that he is paying the family, and will try to visit as often as possible. He even requests, should Henry have any needs not met, that Henry contact him to facilitate a solution. After this diatribe, "The dark figure at the doctor's side answered with a cheerful laugh. 'These buggy wheels don' look like I washed 'em yesterday, docteh,' he said" (302). Henry, this 'dark figure', appears in good humor, considering he is being taken away from his previous occupation, his friend, and his home. But, more tellingly, Henry neglects to react to any of Trescott's explanation, only referencing the buggy wheels in an allusion to the opening sequences of the narrative, in which he and Jimmie converse while Henry works. Trescott, acknowledging Henry's disassociation, tries again to explain why Henry will stay with Alek Williams. Henry, apparently still unable to understand the sequence of events that have transpired, responds with a chuckle and "'No, 'deed! No, she! Alek Williams don' know a hoss! 'Deed he don't. He don' know a hoss from a pig,' The laugh that followed was like the rattle of pebbles" (302). Henry does not acknowledge the changes, the disfigurement but more so the social response to this disfigurement, that necessitate a change in his lifestyle. Instead, he appears to still consider himself a coachman.

The sequence of events that follows resituates Henry more fully in his "monstrous" role. Henry's escape from the house is only relayed after the fact, and the Williams' family quickly realizes that this "monster" is now at large within the community. The subsequent chapters provide an off-handed telling of Henry's travels, as he supposedly interrupts the birthday party of

a young white girl: Sara Winter. But, the indirect manner with which Henry's movements are explained creates a mythic figure, bound in rumor. It is never clear if Henry *actually* scares any of these children, or if Jake Winter's anger, directed at Dr. Trescott, is based on unfounded speculation. But the manner with which his escape is relayed, followed by the supposed sightings of this traveling creature, work together to showcase Henry's alienation from the townsfolk. This is most evident when he gets to his destination, his former fiance's home.

The most striking instance reflective of Henry's cognitive dysfunctionality occurs when he disappears from the Williams' home and is later discovered at the Farragut residence, trying to court a woman who cannot bear to gaze upon his visage. In another allusion to the night of the fire, before which Henry had visited his lover, Bella Farragut, Henry returns to her home to reconvene their courtship ritual. Bella and her family are notably upset by Henry's sudden appearance, as Crane writes "There appeared suddenly before the Farraguts a monster making a low and sweeping bow. There was an instant's pause, and then occurred something that resembled the effect of an upheaval of the earth's surface" (314). Public response to Henry's sudden appearance is so significant as to crack the very foundation upon which the scene is situated. The Farraguts all scatter, scrambling away from the monstrosity before them. Henry remains unmoved by this response. Instead, Henry graciously and extensively explains himself:

> Standing before this wreck of a family fathering, the monster continued to bow. It even raised a deprecatory claw. 'Doh' make no botheration 'bout me, Miss Fa'gut,' it said, politely. 'No, 'deed. I jes drap in ter ax if yer well this evenin', Miss Fa'gut. Don' make no botheration. No, 'deed. I gwine ax you to go to er daince with me, Miss Fa'gut. I ax you if I can have the magnifercent gratitude of you' company on that 'casion, Miss Fa'gut. (314)

I have included this passage at length to showcase Henry's extended lack of self-awareness. Henry's mode of courtship, which mirrors the practices of respectable white families, is first shown during his original visit. Here, however, the ritual becomes a farce. Henry's inability to understand Bella's visceral response creates the humor, dark as it may be, in this scene. In fact, even as Bella literally crawls away and casts "a miserable glance behind her" at Henry, he neglects her clear discomfort and advances "with a fashionable amble" after her (314). It is quite clear that Bella is not interested in speaking or engaging with Henry in any way, at this point. But, Henry does not acknowledge her clear discomfort. Instead, he dexterously advances closer until she "grovelled in a corner of the room as the creature took a chair. It seated itself very elegantly on the edge. It held an old cap in both hands. 'Don' make no botheration, Miss Fa'gut. Don' make no botherations. No, 'deed. I jes drap in ter ax you if you won' do me the proud of acceptin' ma humble invitation to er daince, Miss Fa'gut" (314). Again, Henry reiterates himself without much variation in language. Bella is clearly 'bothered', but Henry brushes this aside, or fails to perceive it entirely. Finally, Bella throws herself face down on the floor, restricting her vision so she will not see Henry's visage (315). Likely, she believes that this behavior will accelerate his departure, once he realizes how unwelcome he is. But, this behavior is lost on Henry, as evidenced by the manner with which he "sat on the edge of the chair gabbling courteous invitations, and holding the old hat daintily to this stomach" (315). Henry remains a remarkably charming individual, but the nuances of this rhetorical situation have shifted without his apparent recognition, resulting in an uncomfortable scene of guttural discomfort and naïve ignorance. Crane concludes this scene with the amusingly horrifying visage of Bella's mother, "who was of enormous weight, and who for eight years had done little more than sit in an armchair and describe her various ailments, had with speed and agility scaled a high board fence" (315). Though culminating in this amusing

image, this scene develops the rapidity with which the town has turned on Henry, which he is unable to comprehend, for whatever reason.

During his own convalescence, Jimmie is sent away from Henry, and when he returns struggles to reconnect with his old friend. In fact, Jimmie shares the townspeople's sentiment, as "little Jimmie was at first much afraid of the monster who lived in the room over the carriage-house. He could not identify it in any way. Gradually, however, his fear dwindled under the influence of a weird fascination. He sidled into closer and closer relations with it" (321). Jimmie and Henry are no longer friends, it appears. Though Jimmie eventually gets into "closer and closer relations" it appears that he does not recognize that this is Henry, as the narrator instead refers to "it". I do find Jimmie's "weird fascination" to be a possible point of reconnection; perhaps this weird fascination might give way to a recognition of who this individual is. But this does not seem to be the case. The friendship between Jimmie and Henry, at this juncture, appears to have disintegrated. This is further reinforced when Jimmie brings his peers from school to play a game with 'the monster'. The timid Jimmie from the opening is gone, replaced with the gravitas of the kid whose parents bought them the newest toy. When the group turns the corner of the stable, Henry's old haunt, they see Henry, the monster, seated atop a box, "basking in the rays of the afternoon sun" with a "heavy crepe veil" around his head (321). Henry does not respond to the boys. He does not appear to acknowledge their appearance or their approach. Immediately upon seeing this creature, "They halted abruptly at sight from the figure on the box. Jimmie waved his hand with the air of a proprietor" (321). Jimmie now uses the resident Trescott phantom as a means of elevating his social status. Jimmie's boastful attitude during this sequence is rather obvious, and more than a little obnoxious. He has slipped into a boyish confidence, buoyed by his peers' apprehension. This turns into a game of dare, in which each boy, based on age, is expected to showcase his bravery by touching "the monster". Though a relatively low-

stakes situation, I think it worth pointing out the emotional appeal Crane establishes. At this point, Jimmie and Henry's previous relationship has been well-established. This departure, in which Jimmie or the narrator, refuses to even refer to Henry by name, is an especially emotional point in the narrative and essentially signals Henry's eventual removal from Whilomville. Jimmie does not seem to recognize how much this relationship has changed, or perhaps he does not care. Perhaps he is not even sure that this creature is Henry. Henry's effacement in the narrative has been well-documented, and it is worth noting the various modes by which his bodymind is eroded.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at constructions of intelligence and race as established in Stephen Craen's "The Monster". Crane's narrative is most overtly concerned with visual issues, like race and disfigurement, however I argue that there is also a paralleling plot around race and cognition. In this case, Crane pairs the physical disfigurement that Henry undergoes with some form of mental degradation. Suddenly, Henry's behavior suggests that he cannot comprehend external life. While Henry might display moments that could be constituted as 'mental illness', the manner with which his mental capacity and perception are put into focus through his relationship with Jimmie or Bella Farragut suggests that Henry's internal experience becomes disconnected from reality. Henry's visit to the Farragut household could be validated as the actions of a 'madman' traumatized by the events of the narrative. If the reader sympathizes with this reading, it is still worth considering the behaviors that Henry exhibits, and the manner with which this behavior is endemic of his inability to process his surroundings. Yet, I have tried to focus on instances of inexpressibility and incognition that speak to a phenomenological way of engaging with the world. I have argued that Crane invokes race and racial trauma as a source of unintelligibility that

pushes the black bodymind closer to idiocy. The racialization that occurs here pathologizes the black bodymind according to American culture and education, decidedly white constructions during the time of Crane's writing.

Crane's narrative points toward moments of unintelligibility and contextualizes them according to cognitive development and race. Jimmie showcases the reverence of a son for his father, which in this case creates a linguistic mental block. Henry similarly exhibits moments of incomprehension or non-thought during the Trescott fire, a reasonable emotive response that is then tinged with racial underpinnings by Crane's narrator. Crane's narrative implies that the memory of slavery impedes cognition—putting Henry on the same mental wavelength as a young boy. Both individuals are stricken with fear, unable to think or act. But Henry is not captured by the fire in this instant and instead emerges from his stone-footed terror by remembering another exit. Henry emerges from the fiery "confusion" through his own will and his own mental ability. This moment of racial terror, which freezes Henry's movements and thoughts, is replaced with an individual terror that reinvigorates his will to survive. Suddenly, Henry is not too terrified to think or act but is spurred to active thought through fear. For modern readers, this individualistic mode of thinking about race falls flat, considering recent efforts in Critical Race Theory to exemplify the systemic modes by which entire groups have been historically oppressed.

This chapter has focused primarily on Crane's representation of race and intelligence as these components work together to establish an American 19C racial hierarchy. Crane's narrative, written shortly after the passage of the 14th amendment, explores the relationships between people of differing ages and races, and asks the reader to comprehend the nuances of post-slavery America through ambiguous dialogue and description. Crane's attention to the intersectionality of race is significant, even if his narrative aestheticizes Henry's erasure through the troubling use of facial disfigurement to do so. Still, the end-all-be-all moral of Crane's story focuses on the

townspeople of Whilomville, who will, by the end of the novella, force Henry out of the community. The "Monster" of the story is, of course, the town itself. This might be a satisfactory, albeit cruel, ending if not for the intersectional problems that Crane's narrative broaches. The relationship between Jimmie and Henry is entirely forgotten as the focus of the narrative explores Dr. Trescott's unearned sentimentality regarding Henry's ostracization. By the end of the narrative, Henry has become an object of ridicule, a deathly creature cast aside by even his best friend, a being whose social erasure enables a continuation of racial and able-bodied normalcy in the town of Whilomville.

Conclusion

On the night of January 28, 2025, a U.S. Military Blackhawk helicopter and a commercial airliner collided in midair and fell into the Potomac River; there were no survivors. This was the first major U.S. mid-air collision in 16 years. While responders were still dredging the river for scrap evidence and bodily remains, President Trump briefed the press. Partly reading from a FAA document and partly ad-libbing, he exclaimed that "The FAA's diversity push includes focus on hiring people with severe intellectual and psychiatric disability, that is amazing. And then it says FAA says people with severe disabilities are most [sic] underrepresented segment of the workforce. So, they want them in and they can be air traffic controllers. I don't think so". Trump's inability to critically interpret this document is embarrassingly ironic, considering the topic of discussion. No rational person would suggest that a severely intellectually disabled individual should oversee aviation safety, and they would also have the good grace not to suggest otherwise.

Yet Trump continued by espousing the importance of "brainpower," relying on outdated eugenic philosophy that separates "naturally talented geniuses" from "regular people" who "won't be able to do" the job of an air traffic controller (and other important jobs). Trump's ableist and racist philosophy is concisely explained in his 2015 book *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again*, an extended glimpse into the eugenic ideology that has guided Trump policy on welfare and immigration. Susan Currell argues that Trump mirrors 1930s eugenicists who wished to cut support from the disabled, lest they "crippl[e] the health and recovery of the nation".[178] The policies adopted by the current administration signal a reversion to the eugenic ideologies of the nineteenth-century; Trump's distinction between 'natural geniuses'

[178] Currell, Susan. "'This May Be the Most Dangerous Thing Donald Trump Believes': Eugenic Populism and the American Body Politic". *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2019, p. 292.

and ‘regular people’ imagines intelligence and ID alongside class, sex, and race: the genius, for Trump and his MAGA supporters, is always first-and-foremost a wealthy, straight, white man.

This project has analyzed the construction of ID in the nineteenth-century as it correlates and conflicts with contemporary definitions of intellectual disability. My project has therefore focused on certain historical terms: idiocy, imbecility, and feeble-mindedness. The invention of these terms is a recognition of biological inequality, to which Rousseau points when he distinguishes between ‘natural’ and ‘political’ inequalities. Rousseau writes that natural inequality arises from differences in “age, health, strength of the body and qualities of the mind or soul”, whereas “moral or political” inequality is brought about “from a sort of convention” and is “authorized…by the consent of men”.[179] Mankind has layered invented modes of inequality atop the natural—attaching social meaning to ‘natural’ forms of inequality. What is ‘idiocy’ if not the overlapping of political and natural inequality—a mapping of morality and class onto biology? The construction of intelligence, and its deficient iterations, shifts drastically throughout the nineteenth century. Definitions of idiocy, for instance, transitioned with the sciences that increasingly sought to quantify intelligence, to quantify exactly how ‘naturally’ unequal one person was. However, prior to the IQ tests of Alfred Binet, which were first published in 1908, diagnosis relied primarily on social factors. Did the child advance in their education at the same pace as their peers (assuming they received a consistent education)? Did they exhibit appropriate social behaviors in public? Could the individual manage their finances? Did they refrain from making sexual advances toward men? Intelligence was gauged according to the social expectations of that individual; each of these questions speaks to the potential intersectional nature of any study of 19C ID.

[179] Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality,* p. 77.

My project has focused on a particular period as it reflects the nationalistic implications of ID and its historic iterations. Tracing the construction of the 'idiot', 'imbecile', and 'feeble-minded' individual from approximately 1842 to 1898, my project purposefully avoids the Edwardian period, in which the eugenic movement became a dominant ideology and the sciences increasingly sought to quantify, hierarchize, segregate, and even sterilize bodyminds that did not fit the mold of American or European 'perfectibility'. Rather, my project locates the origins of this movement and traces the shifting image of ID as a national dilemma. The reverberations of these eugenic leanings are increasingly visible in right-wing politics in not just Trump's America but in Germany's recent elections, as well; the election of both administrations highlights a current political swing to the right, especially when it comes to immigration discourse. The ideology of this reactionary nationalist swing is reminiscent of the time period in which I have focused my project. In the 19C, concerns of miscegenation relied on tired metaphors of 'contagion' and 'poison', imagining the nation as a body succumbing to invasive entities, most often with racial connotations. Not only would these bodyminds leech off the welfare state, but they would also intermingle with those who were 'fit', contaminating otherwise 'good stock'. Concerns were not limited to physical health, however. In fact, the eugenic movement saw ID as its absolute adversary. My project has extensively discussed fears of degeneration, or "reversion" as Darwin put it in *The Descent of Man* (1871), when he warned "We must remember that progress is no invariable rule" and argued that the progress of a civilization was reliant upon "an increase in the actual number of the population, on the number of the men endowed with high intellectual and moral faculties, as well as on their standard of excellence".[180] Darwin, here, loosely reinforces the argument for positive eugenics, the method of breeding for positive traits initially suggested by Francis Galton, which would eventually metastasize into the eugenic

[180] Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man.* Penguin Classics, 2004, p. 166.

movement of historical infamy. Even Darwin's text emphasizes the stakes for humanity, arguing that the alternative to eugenic action was a civilization's reversion "to a savage state" (163). Such savagery was already present in the figure of the 'idiot', whose reliance on public welfare became increasingly apparent throughout the century. The extent to which nation and ID overlap is further complicated by the politics of welfare programs, a point of contention that continues today. Many of the narratives discussed in this project engage directly in discussions of nation, which is why I have placed a focus on congenital forms of intellectual disability over acquired forms.

Imperfectly Understood concentrates on congenital forms of disability because of the psychological influence of heredity, of pedigree. My chapter on Joseph Conrad discusses this in connection with Victorian maternity; the specific angst that Susan undergoes, exacerbated by emotional and sexual abuse from her husband, is bound up in Victorian expectations for women. Jean-Pierre, in forcing his wife to have child after child, commits sexual assault to generate legacy and labor. Conrad wants us to be horrified at the prospect of repeatedly birthing children with intellectual disabilities, to be viewed by neighbors as the propagator of deficient forms of humanity. But he also explores the psychological qualities of maternity, the anxiety of motherhood and the unambiguous dread of disability. Still, some say "we want more babies".[181] The coerced reproduction of labor continues today. Modern conservatives often spout this pro-natalist ideology; for instance, J.D. Vance (in)famously touted such sentiments while simultaneously condemning his then political opponent, Kamala Harris, for not birthing children of her own (despite being a stepmother to her husband's children).[182] Conservative natalism,

---

[181] Qtd. in Betz, Bradford. "Trump Pledges Universal Coverage for IVF Treatment 'Because we Want More Babies'". *Fox News,* 29 August 2024, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-pledges-universal-coverage-ivf-treatment-to-help-working-families, Accessed 27 March 2025.

[182] Vance lamented "childless cat ladies", democratic politicians who were also women, that decided not to or had not yet given birth to their own children and therefore did not have a "direct stake" in the country's future. He argued that the United States was no longer reproducing at a sustainable rate, claiming "We want babies not just because they are economically useful. We want more babies because children are good. And

coupled with right-wing views on women's health rights, performs an uncomfortable imagination of "pro-life" ideology. This view emphasizes quantity of life over quality. Such respect for the notion of 'life' does not address the pain, both emotional and physical, that comes with different embodiments of health. It neglects health and heredity entirely. It ignores centuries of medico-ethical discourse. It eschews any belief in the natural right to one's own body. What could be a generative discussion of disability, health, and individual freedom is instead highjacked by arguments of faith and nation.

The stigma against people with ID remains strong, reinforcing the taboo nature of sex and sexuality for such individuals. While the 19C became obsessed with the supposed rampant sexuality of idiots, imbeciles, and especially the feeble-minded (as my chapter on Agnes Mary Frances Robinson discusses), contemporary discussions of ID and sexuality vacillate between moral incredulity and more nuanced discussions of sexual health, sexual identity, and personhood. These academic discussions reflect concerted efforts to reconsider questions of agency and individual freedom, worthwhile points of emphasis considering the oppressive history of ID which I have partially laid out in this dissertation. The sexuality of people with ID remains a fraught topic, however; the extent to which a person with an ID can provide consent is dependent upon their individual experience—establishing legal and moral questions that interrogate individual ability and individual freedom. Caught between issues of sexual freedom, consent, and health, the complexity of these topics is bound up in the construction of intellectual disability. While research in this area exists, the topic itself remains extraordinarily taboo. The

---

we believe children are good, because we are not sociopaths." What Vance's comments fail to acknowledge is that, coupled with conservative anti-abortion efforts, the babies who are born may not even be "economically useful", if the 'Bacadou children' are any evidence. Vance re-engages with traditional views that refuse, in a callous and almost sociopathic manner, to address the emotional and economic challenges of raising children with disabilities. Licon, Adriana Gomez. "JD Vance has long been on a quest to encourage more births in the United States". *Associated Press,* 2024, https://apnews.com/article/jd-vance-childless-cat-ladies-birth-rates-555c0f78ef8dd4c13c88b9e8d5f0024a.

story of Glenwood, Iowa, which I discussed in the conclusion of my chapter on "Janet Fisher" is just one example how research on this subject has exceeded ethical standards, seeming to have fallen backward in time to the archaic and inhumane experimentation of the 19C. The very notion of ID and sexuality will incense some. I share this sentiment to the extent that I do not believe my brother will ever be able to provide consent. This would not be not sex—but sexual assault. I can make that statement decisively, having intimate knowledge of Zach's mental faculties; but Zach's condition is particularly severe and not representative of the forms ID can take. The natural inequality of intelligence creates this quandary of consent. I have tried to approach this taboo topic with due respect and acceptance.

Our obsession with health facilitates the continuation of eugenic philosophy; however, I am unwilling to put a moral evaluation on such practices. The combination of prenatal screening and selective abortion has been viewed by some in DS as an uncomfortable approximation to eugenics; there is a distinctly awkward clash of Feminist and DS inherent in this discussion. Disability scholar Marsha Saxton, for instance, acknowledges that the mother should have the right to decide not to have a baby, even if their reasoning is that it "just seems too difficult", yet Saxton also points to the "duress" of this situation: the mother has certain stigmatizing views of disability, a compilation of cultural attitudes toward 'deficiency'.[183] These attitudes are perpetuated through the images and narratives established through public discourse. The mixed emotions to which Saxton refers are not generally expressed publicly. At the same time, show me a parent or a prospective parent, who is not deeply concerned with the 'health' of their child. DS scholars have merely taken to asking: is this about 'health' or is this about 'perfection'? Michael Bérubé, in analyzing the science fiction film *Gattaca* (1997), a film centered around a dystopian

[183] Saxton, Marsha. "Disability Rights and Selective Abortion". *The Disability Studies Reader*, Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017, p. 82.

society that seeks perfection through genetic selection, uses the film's pretense to argue against the eugenic practice of genetic selection. Bérubé similarly grapples with the bioethics of the practice, proffering that Americans believe it is "morally acceptable" to screen for "profoundly debilitating" conditions that involve "severe and ceaseless suffering over a nasty, brutish, and short life span".[184] Of course, Bérubé also points to the number of conditions that fall elsewhere on this spectrum, making clear that there is little consensus on these more ambiguous forms of disability, like Down syndrome, Huntington disease, or Multiple Sclerosis. I think it is worth asking the question: What constitutes 'suffering' in these cases?

Growing up with a brother who required continual care, I was consistently aware of the emotional challenges, even the trauma, that comes with such a family dynamic—less so the socioeconomic challenges with which my parents dealt. We did not 'suffer'. However, living disabled in America is expensive, and my brother's life is no exception. Luckily, my family has been able to rely on welfare programs such as social security and Medicaid to pay for the exorbitant anti-convulsant medications he needs. Of course, Zach's epilepsy is only one facet of his disability; the benefits that Zach receives from the federal government allow him to receive care that our family could otherwise not afford. The fact that our family sits firmly in the middle-class, with multiple members who can reliably provide care and thereby offset certain costs, belies the financial reality of many families in different economic circumstances. Eric Emerson surmises that "the additional financial and social costs associated with bringing up a child with intellectual disability will increase the chances of a family descending into poverty and reduce the chances of them escaping from poverty".[185] Is poverty not a form of suffering? The embedded

---

[184] Bérubé, Michael. "Disability, Democracy, and the New Genetics". *The Disability Studies Reader,* Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017, p. 93.
[185] Emerson, Eric. "Poverty and children with intellectual disabilities in the world's richer countries" *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, Vol. 29, No. 4, p. 325.

political inequality that intellectual impairment breeds is why I am unable to refer to 'impairment' across much of this project. Such impairment implies different forms of inequality, different forms of suffering that extend beyond just the biological.

There are also emerging questions of how the knowledge of prenatal screening factors into the cost of existence in a welfare state. Susan Wolf has published extensively on the financial and legal implications of this knowledge, arguing that health and life insurance companies have a vested interest in these pre-diagnoses of health. Furthermore, Wolf and Kahn suggest that disability insurance has become more of a priority for Americans than life insurance. The uncertainty of disability and the loss of income that can arise as a result of illness or injury drives Americans' concern toward disability.[186] It is, of course, more expensive to be disabled than to be dead. Disability insurance can mitigate the natural inequality that comes from impairment—but Wolf and Kahn also point out the pervasion of stigma, especially when it comes to employment. Workers who view themselves as disabled are often met with hostility or ambivalence from peers, creating an alienating environment. But Wolf and Kahn also point to a deeply disturbing trend, enabled because of medical technologies: the discovery of certain traits can entail increased costs. Disability insurers, especially private ones, walk a fine line that at times appears to lean toward discrimination. The more information one can have about their own health, their own heredity, the more they can make informed decisions regarding their health, and the health of their children. However, research indicates that medical technologies designed to produce this insight might also function as forms of biopolitical surveillance.

Much of this conclusion emphasizes a truism about ID in the public eye: ID is not interesting, but it is interesting who it affects. This runs parallel with some sentiments toward ID;

[186] Wolf, Susan and Jeffrey P. Kahn. "Genetic Testing and the Future of Disability Insurance: Ethics, Law & Policy". *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics,* Vol. 35, No. 2, 2007, p. 6.

the 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal, whom Foucault quotes in *Madness and Civilization*, offers that "I can easily conceive of a man without hands, feet, head (for it is only experience which teaches us that the head is more necessary than the feet). But I cannot conceive of man without thought; that would be a stone or a brute" (Qtd. in Foucault 70). Pascal's sentiment affirms an overarching truism: historically, ID has not been considered worth thinking about. The lack of scholarship on the topic is evidence enough of that. And yet, I cannot help but find references to intellectual disability everywhere: derogatory words hurled across cyberspace; 'jokes' which rely exclusively on some amusing quality inherent in the word 'retard';[187] ; or the epithets bandied about in the political arena—specifically targeted and designed to reduce the humanness of a political opponent.

[187] Elon Musk's calls to "legalize comedy" at a 2025 CPAC event received ample criticism, especially considering what most described as a particularly unfunny diatribe regarding liberalism, political correctness, and comedy. Musk's sense of humor appears reliant on the taboo and the offensive, often relying on the shock value of the word 'retard', a trend visible on Musk's social media platform since he purchased it. One post refers to the Ben Stiller film *Tropic Thunder*, alluding to Stiller's left-leaning political views in spite of the film's infamous use of intellectual disability for comedic purposes. @elonmusk. "Damn he went full retard". [Image Attached], *X,* 27 November 2024, 6:52 A.M., https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1861785166680829996.

Bibliography

Adukia, Anjali, Richard Hornbeck, Daniel Keniston, and Benjamin Lualdi. "The Social Construction of Race During Reconstruction". National Bureau of Economic Research, 2025.

Akdemir, Bora. "Opinions of Special Education Teachers on Inappropriate Sexual Behaviors in Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities". *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, Vol. 70, No. 4.

Ali, Zainab. "Pica in People with Intellectual Disability: A literature Review of Aetiology, Epidemiology, and Complications". *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability,* Vol. 26, No. 3, 2001.

Arditi, Benjamin. "Populism, or, politics at the edges of democracy". *Contemporary Politics,* Vol. 9, No. 1, 2003.

Baines, Susannah, Eric Emerson, Janet Robertson, and Chris Hatton. "Sexual activity and sexual health among young adults with and without mild/moderate intellectual disability". *Public Health*, Vol. 18, No. 667, 2018.

Baynton, Douglas. "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History". *The Disability Studies Reader,* Fifth edition, Edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 2017.

Benedet, Janine and Isabel Grant. "Sexual Assault and the Meaning of Power and Authority for Women with Mental Disabilities". *Feminist Legal Studies,* Vol. 22, 2014.

Benton, Bond and Daniela Peterka-Benton. "Use of the slur 'retard' triples on X after Elon Musk shares the word in a post". Montclair University, School of Communication and Media News, pp. 1-13. https://www.montclair.edu/school-of-communication-and-media/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/01/Montclair-Social-Media-Study-Musk-and-R-Word-Increase-on-X-1.pdf.

Bergh, Andreas, and Anders Kärna. "Globalization and Populism in Europe". *Public Choice,* Vol. 189, 2021.

Bérubé, Michael. "Disability, Democracy, and the New Genetics". *The Disability Studies Reader,* Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017.

---. *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way we Read.* New York University Press, 2016.

Betz, Bradford. "Trump Pledges Universal Coverage for IVF Treatment 'Because we Want More Babies'". *Fox News,* 29 August 2024, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-pledges-universal-coverage-ivf-treatment-to-help-working-families, Accessed 27 March 2025.

The Bible. The Oxford Study Bible, Oxford University Press, 1992, Matthew 6.22-23.

Block, Pamela. “Sexuality, Fertility, and Danger: Twentieth-Century Images of Women with Cognitive Disabilities”. *Sexuality and Disability*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2000.

Englot, Dario J. and Hal Blumenfeld. “Consciousness and Epilepsy: why are complex-partial seizures complex?” *Progress in Brain Research*, Vol. 177, 2010.

Boyte, Harry C. “Populism—Bringing Culture Back In”. *The Good Society,* Vol. 21, No. 2, 2012.

“Brazen, n. 1, n. 3”. *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, March 2025.

Bunga, Divija et al. “Children with Intellectual Disability, Impact on Caregivers: A Cross-Sectional Study”. *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry***.** Vol 36., No. 2, 2020.

Cameron, Chris. “These are the People who Died in Connection with the Capitol Riot”. *The New York Times.* January 5, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-deaths.html.

Chauhan, Sameera. “Managing Sex, Safeguarding the Soldier: Gender, Race, and Regulationism in Nineteenth Century Colonial Punjab”. *Feminist Encounters*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2024.

Cleman, John. “Blunders of Virtue: The Problem of Race in Stephen Crane’s ‘The Monster’”. *American Literary Realism,* Vol. 34, No. 2, 2002.

Clover, Joshua. *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings.* Verso, 2019.

Coats, Jason M. “Unreliable Heterodiegesis and Scientific Racism in Conrad’s *Secret Agent*”. *Modernism/modernity,* Vol. 20, No. 4, 2013.

Collins, Irene. “Charles Dickens and the French Revolution”. *Literature and History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1990.

Conrad, Joseph. “The Idiots”. *Tales of Unrest*, 1898.

Cox, Pamela. “Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency”. *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996.

Crawford, Iain. “‘Nature…Drenched in Blood’: *Barnaby Rudge* and Wordsworth’s ‘The Idiot Boy’”. *Dickens Quarterly.* Vol. 8, No. 1, 2009.

Currell, Susan. “‘This May Be the Most Dangerous Thing Donald Trump Believes’: Eugenic Populism and the American Body Politic”. *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2019, pp. 291-302.

Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species*. Penguin Classics, 2009.

--. *The Descent of Man.* Penguin Classics, 2004.

Davis, Lennard. “Disability, Normality, and Power” *The Disability Studies Reader,* Fifth Edition, Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017.

DeFoe, Daniel. *Mere Nature Delineated Or A Body without a Soul Being Observations Upon the Young Forester Lately Brought to Town From Germany with Suitable Applications. Also, a Brief Dissertation Upon the Usefulness and Necessity of Fools, Whether Political or Natural* (London: T. Warner, 1726).

“DEI has ‘become a stand in for being Black and unqualified’: GOP political strategist”. *Youtube*, uploaded by CNN, 1 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVKCPyKMS2E&t=313s. Accessed 27 March 2025.

Dendy, Mary. “The Feeble-Minded and Crime”. *The Lancet,* 1902.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities.* Edited by Andrew Sanders, Oxford English Press, 1998.

--. *Barnaby Rudge.* Penguin, 1841.

Dickinson, Hilary. “Idiocy in Nineteenth-Century Fiction Compared with Medical Perspectives of the Time”. *History of Psychiatry,* 2000.

Dolmage, Jay. “Disabled Upon Arrivalp. The Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island”. *The Disability Studies Reader,* Fifth Edition, Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017.

Douthwaite, Julia V. *The Wild Girl Natural Man and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment.* University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Edwards-Grossi, Élodie and Christopher D.E. Willoughby. “Slavery and Its Afterlives in US Psychiatry” *Public Health Then & Now*, Vol. 114, No. 53, 2024.

@elonmusk. “Damn he went full retard”. [Image Attached], *X,* 27 November 2024, 6:52 A.M., https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1861785166680829996.

Elousrouti, Layla Tahiri, Meryem Lamchahab, Nawal Bougtoub, Hinde Elfatemi, Laila Chbani, Taoufik Harmouch, Mustapha Maaroufi, and Afaf Amarti Riffi. “Subependymal giant cell astrocytoma (SEGA): a case report and review of the literature”. *Journal of Medical Case Reports*, Vol. 10, No. 35, 2016.

Emerson, Eric, Janet Robertson, Nicky Gregory, Chris Hatton, Sophia Kessissoglou, Angela Hallam, Martin Knapp, Krister Järbrink, Ann Netten, and Patricia Walsh. "The Quality and Costs of Village Communities, Residential Campuses and Community-Based Residential Supports for People with Learning Disabilities." *Tizard Learning Disability Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2000.

Emerson, Eric. “Poverty and children with intellectual disabilities in the world’s richer countries” *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, Vol. 29, No. 4.

Federici, Sylvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation.* Autonomedia, 2014.

Feola, Michael. "Introduction: The Rage of Replacement". *The Rage of Replacement: Far Right Politics and Demographic Fear,* University of Minnesota Press, 2024.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny". *The Uncanny.* Penguin Classics, 2003.

Gibson, Ginger. "Trump Says immigrants are 'poisoning the blood of our country.' Biden Campaign likens comments to Hitler". *NBC News,* 17 December 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-says-immigrants-are-poisoning-blood-country-biden-campaign-liken-rcna13014. Accessed 27 March 2025.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* Simon & Schuster, 1963.

Goodley and Lawthorn "The Disavowal of Uncanny Disabled Children: Why Non-disabled People are so Messed up Around Childhood Disability", *Disability Children's Childhood Studies*.

Goodman, Joyce. "Pedagogy and sex: Mary Dendy (1855-1933), feeble-minded girls and the Sandlebridge Schools, 1902-33." Vol. 34, No. 2, 2005.

Hanft, Lila. "The Politics of Maternal Ambivalence in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song*". *Victorian Literature and Culture,* Vol. 19, No. 2, 2001.

Harrington, Ellen Burton. "Suicide, Feminism, and 'the miserable dependence of girls' in 'The Idiots,' 'The Secret Agent', and 'Chance'. *The Conradian,* Vol. 37, No. 2, 2012, pp. 50-66.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* Oxford University Press, 1997.

Harvey, Clare. "The Uncanny Effect of Disability: Uncomfortable Maternal Love for a Disabled Child". *Contemporary Psychoanalysis,* Vol. 56, No. 1.

Hawbreaker, Becky Wilson. "'No Middle Ground': Change and Controversy at Glenwood State School". *Iowa Heritage Illustrated,* 1998.

Harvey, David. *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Blackwell Publishing, 1990.

"Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech" *Time.* June 16, 2015. https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/

Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf.* Translated by James Murphy, Gutenberg.net, 2002.

Hoffman, E.T.A. “The Sandman”. *Tales of Hoffman*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 2004.

Holmes, Martha Stoddard. *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Litertature.* University of Michigan Press, 2004.

“Innocent, n.7.” *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, July 2023.

“Intellectual Disability.” *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, January 2025.

“Intelligence, n. 1., n. 3.” *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, January 2025.

Ireland, William Wotherspoon. *On Idiocy and Imbecility.* J. & A. Churchill, 1877.

Islam, Monica P, and E. Steve Roach. “Tuberous Sclerosis Complex”. *Handbook of Clinical Neurology,* Vol. 132, 2015.

Jackson, Mark. “Institutional Provision for the Feeble-Minded in Edwardian England: Sandlebridge and the Scientific Morality of Permanent Care”. *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996.

“*Joint Position Statement of AAIDD and The Arc”*. AAIDD, 2013, https://www.aaidd.org/news-policy/policy/position-statements/sexuality.

“Judge Sentences Ex-Iowa Workers Accused of Resident Abuse”. *Associated Press*, Last modified February 27, 2018. **https://apnews.com/general-news-5dce4ef628a54958b82456ce07ce079f**

Kafer, Alison. “Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips”. *Feminist, Queer, Crip.* Indiana University Press, 2013.

Kahn, Coppelia. “The Hand that Rocks the Cradle”. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd Edition, Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Kauffman, Clark. “Lawsuit Claims Reynolds’ staff, AG’s office approved sexual-arousal experiments at Glenwood”. *Iowa Capital Dispatch*, last modified December 2, 2020. https://iowacapitaldispatch.com/2020/12/02/lawsuit-claims-reynolds-staff-ags-office-approved-sexual-arousal-experiments-at-glenwood/

Kristeva, Julia. “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”. *The Portable Kristeva Updated Edition.* Edited by Kelly Oliver, Columbia University Press, 2002.

Krutzig, Sally. “’Trying to rewrite history’: Boise Woman Guilty in Capitol Riot Rejects Trump Pardon”. Idaho Statesman, January 22, 2025. https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/crime/article298937855.html

Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind.* Loki’s Publishing.

Leary, Declan. “Was It for This the Clay Grew Tall?: Jordan Neely was a victim, but not in the way progressive activists would have you believe”. *The American Conservative,* 2023, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/was-it-for-this-the-clay-grew-tall/

“‘Let him die’: Trump’s nephew shares what he says Trump told him when he asked for help with his son”. *CNN.* https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/04/politics/video/fred-trump-financial-help-medical-expenses-bts-digvid. Accessed November 5, 2024.

Leys, Tony. “Where do the residents of Iowa’s Glenwood Resource Center Go When it Closes?” *Des Moines Register*, last modified September 12, 2022. https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2022/09/12/when-glenwood-resource-center-closes-where-residents-go-disabilities-iowa/8028576001/

Licon, Adriana Gomez. “JD Vance has long been on a quest to encourage more births in the United States”. *Associated Press,* 2024, https://apnews.com/article/jd-vance-childless-cat-ladies-birth-rates-555c0f78ef8dd4c13c88b9e8d5f0024a.

Loftis, Sonya Freeman. “The Autistic Gothic: *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Glass Menagerie,* and *The Sound and the Fury*”. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum.* Indiana University Press, 2015.

Lukacs, Georg. *The Historical Novel.* Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

McCalman, Iain. “Controlling the Riots: Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* and Romantic Revolution”. *The Journal of the Historical Association,* Vol. 84, No. 275, 1999.

McDonagh, Patrick, C.F. Goodey and Tim Stainton. “Introduction: the emergent critical history of intellectual disability”. *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History: 1200-1900.* Edited by Patrick McDonagh, Manchester University Press, 2018.

McDonagh, Patrick. “Essential Women: femininity and idiocy”. *Idiocy: A Cultural History.* Liverpool University Press, 2008.

Melo, Cláudia et al. “Prevalence and determinants of motor stereotypies in autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis”. *Autism,* Vol. 24, No. 3, 2020.

Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women.* Doubleday & Company, 1976.

Nelson, Steven. “Trump Declares ‘Liberation Day’ and ‘revolution of common sense’ in Second Inaugural Address”. *New York Post*, Jan 20, 2025. https://nypost.com/2025/01/20/us-news/trump-declares-liberation-day-and-revolution-of-common-sense-in-second-inaugural-address/

Norlin, David and M. Broberg. “Parents of children with and without intellectual disability: couple relationship and individual wellbeing”. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research,* Vol. 57, No. 6, 2013.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Pedlar, Valerie. "Madness and Marriage". *The Most Dreadful Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction.* Liverpool University Press, 2006.

"Populism, n. 1." *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, March 2025.

Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life.* 2014.

Protestant Association. *An Appeal from The Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain Concerning the Probable Tendency of the Late Act of Parliament in Favour of the Papists.* London: J.W. Pasham, 1779.

Randall, M and Cumella S. "People with an Intellectual Disability Living in an Intentional Community". *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, Vol. 53, No. 8, 2009.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution.* W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.

Roden, Rosemary Claire, Elizabeth Koss Schmidt, and Cynthia Holland-Hall. "Sexual health education for adolescents and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities: recommendations for accessible sexual and reproductive health information". *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, Vol. 4, No. 9.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Penguin Books, 1984.

--. *The Social Contract.* Translated by G.D.H Cole, 1920.

Rushton, Peter. "Idiocy, the Family and the Community in Early modern North-East England". *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996.

Russell, Marta and Jean Stewart. "Disablement, Prison, and Historical Segregation". *Capitalism & Disability*, Edited by Keith Rosenthal, Haymarket Books, 2019.

Saxton, Marsha. "Disability Rights and Selective Abortion". *The Disability Studies Reader*, Edited by Lennard Davis, Routledge, 2017.

Scahill, Andrew. "Deviled Eggs: Teratogenesis and the Gynecological Gothic in the Cinema of Monstrous Birth". *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in Gothic Literature.* Edited by Ruth Bienstock Anolik, 2010.

Schmidt, Gerald. "'A likely lad…for many purposes': the uses of naiveté in Barnaby Rudge and David Copperfield. *Dickens Quarterly*. Vol. 20, No. 2, 2003.

Schweik, Susan. *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public.* New York University Press, 2010.

Scull, Andrew. *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700-1900.* Yale University Press, 2003.

Seguin, Edward. *Idiocy and its Treatment by the Physiological Method Volume 1*, Columbia University, 1907.

Schuele, Stephan U. and Hans O Lüders. "Intractable Epilepsy: Management and Therapeutic Alternatives." *Lancet Neural*, Vol. 7, 2008.

Shuttleworth, Russel, Nikki Wedgwood, and Nathan J. Wilson. "The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity" *Man and Masculinities*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2012.

"Simple, n1.3.a, n1.4b." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2019, oed.com/dictionary/simple_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#22534981. Accessed 31 October 2024.

Sorkin, Amy Davidson. "Donald Trump's Nuclear Uncle". *The New Yorker.* April 8, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/donald-trumps-nuclear-uncle. Accessed November 8, 2024

Spence, Gordon, "Dickens as a Historical Novelist". *Dickensian,* Vol. 72, No. 378, 1976.

"Stereotypy". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stereotypy_n?tab=meaning_and_use#20629896. Accessed 31 July 2024.

Stubblefield, Anne. "Beyond the Pale: Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization". *Hypatia*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

Taylor, Chloë. "Medical Legal Report on the Mental State of Charles-Joseph Jouy Accused of Indecent Assaults". *Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes: An Anti-Carceral Analysis,* 2018.

Tharinger, Deborah, Connie Horton and Susan Millea. "Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children and Adults with Mental Retardation and other Handicaps" *Child Abuse & Neglect,* Vol. 14, 1990.

Thomson, Rosemarie-Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies.* Columbia University Press, 1997.

Tremain, Shelley. "Educating Jouy". *Hypatia*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2013.

Trump, Donald. [@teamtrump]. (April 8 2024) *Under my leadership, the Republican Party will always support the creation of strong, thriving, and healthy American Families.* [Video Attached][Post]. X. https://x.com/TeamTrump/status/1777315152959815883

---. "President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protestors". January 6, Washington D.C., video, 1:25, C-Span.org, https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-video-statement-on-capitol-protesters/587285

---. “Town Hall: Latinos Ask… Donald Trump Responds”. *Univision Noticias,* Youtube.com, January 15, video, 1:03:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3tvZi5fTZw.

“Turing Test”. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2024,

Treisman, Rachel. “Elon Musk faces criticism for encouraging Germans to move beyond ‘past guilt’”. *NPR,* 27 January 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/01/27/nx-s1-5276084/elon-musk-german-far-right-afd-holocaust. Accessed 27 March 2025.

Underwood, Lisa. “Advances in Tuberous Sclerosis Complex (TSC) Research”. *Tuberous Sclerosis Complex: A Rare Genetic Condition Associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder.* Edited by Jane McCarthy, Lisa Underwood, and Charlotte Tye, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2016.

Vardoulakis, Dimitris. “The Return of Negation: The Doppelganger in Freud’s ‘The “Uncanny”””. *SubStance*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2006.

Walmsley “Women and the Mental Deficiency Aft of 1913: Citizenship, Sexuality and Regulation”. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*. Vol. 28.

“WATCH: Charlie Kirk sits down with JD Vance | LiveNow from FOX”. *Youtube*, uploaded by LiveNOW from FOX, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBR6FurPXIw. September 4, 2024. Accessed on November 5, 2024.

Wendell, Susan. “Unhealthily Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities”. *Hypatia*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2001.

Wertheim, Stanley. “Unraveling the Humanist: Stephen Crane and Ethnic Minorities”. *American Literary Realism*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1998.

Wolf, Susan and Jeffrey P. Kahn. “Genetic Testing and the Future of Disability Insurance: Ethics, Law & Policy”. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics,* Vol. 35, No. 2, 2007.

Wright, David. “Childlike in His Innocence: Lay Attitudes to ‘Idiots’ and ‘Imbeciles’ in Victorian England”. *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities.* Edited by David Wright and Anne Digby, Routledge Press, 1996.

---. *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901.* Oxford University Press, 2001.

Yigider, Ayse Pelin, Fatma Tulin Kayhan, Ozgur Yigit, Ayse Kavak, and Cemal Cingi. “Skin Diseases of the Nose” *American Journal fo Rhinology &* Allergy, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2016.