

Literature and the Notion of Intellectual Disability

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A precise definition of intellectual disability has long proved elusive. Various attempts have been made to measure and rationalize intellectual or cognitive ability (and thus disability), ranging from anecdotal behavioral criteria to IQ tests to the quest for an "intelligence" gene. While these efforts repeatedly prove wanting, they have encouraged a disheartening amount of public (and professional) incredulity regarding the nature of intelligence and cognitive ability.

Literary texts provide another way of investigating the idea of intellectual disability. Literary representations of intellectual disability can be used to cast light upon the supposedly more objective scientific, medical, educational or legal representations. In literary texts, apparently disabled characters - like all characters - serve a function. This function may be narrative in that their acts, or even their being, helps to move the plot forward; the function may be symbolic, in that the characters (or more accurately, the disability) come to represent certain qualities or ideas. Most often, in fact, these characters are of importance in their relationships to others - or more accurately, in the importance of other people's relations to them - rather than in actually performing acts that move the narrative forward. But, in art as in life, the idea of intellectual disability is not benign or empty. As literary critic Sander Gilman has noted with respect to disease, "the infected individual is never value-neutral" (p. 7). Similarly, with disability, there is always a value attached.

The idea of intellectual disability has never been without cultural meaning. Numerous terms have been used to identify a condition of seeming intellectual impairment, yet none can actually lay claim to being "value-neutral" (possible exceptions are such scientific terms as "Trisomy-21," the condition underlying Down's Syndrome, which carries little semiotic baggage by virtue not of the scientific objectivity it may possess but its obscurity). Certainly none of the common terms, contemporary or historical, used to designate intellectual difference (from the long-standing terms "fool," "idiot," and "simpleton" to more recent "mentally retarded," "mentally handicapped," and "intellectually disabled") escape being connotative as well as denotative. And it is these connotations, the subtext of words, that may be most interesting to the literary or cultural critic.

At this point, I am forced to confess that I have no alternative but to appropriate one of these loaded terms for my own purposes here. I use "intellectual disability" because it is a contemporary term whose connotative powers are not so developed as other more pejorative terms: it simply carries less semiotic baggage. The proviso, of course, is that intelligence has no clear definition, nor is there any way to measure it, as Stephen Jay Gould has argued persuasively in *The Mismeasure*

of Man. "Intellectual disability" is not an adequate or accurate description of what someone might have. Instead, it is a reified notion. In naming "intellectual disability," we create it. To cite Gilman again, "the idea of mental illness structures both the perception of disease and its form" (p. 19). The same observation holds true for the idea of intellectual disability. So what I am discussing in this article is not something that certain people have; rather, I am interested in analysing an notion that has been formulated and applied to certain individuals without regard as to whether or not the condition so named does in fact exist.

One can examine notions of intellectual disability in texts through the recurrence of certain patterns that illustrate an anxiety over its presence and nature. The forms that this "disability anxiety" takes are largely ideological and thus most clearly evident in other points of conflict in any given society, where fissures in the ideological monolith occur. A brief example: my study of representations of intellectual disability in literature has turned up a strong link between intellectual disability among men and an inability to manage money, while among women intellectual disability is more often characterized by an apparent inability to contain sexual desire. Obviously, the two expressions of intellectual disability are linked to cultural anxieties about notions of masculinity and femininity, what qualities define these conditions, and how these definitions can be stabilized. Concern over the means of distinguishing gender qualities points to a need to contain ambiguity that may unsettle dominant perceptions ordering the social world.

But aspects other than gender identification come into play. A study of, for instance, nineteenth century British literature and representations of disability suggest that the issues of the time - the woman's place in society, the problem of the poor, the health of the British empire and the impulse of the dominant classes to control the social body - all affect the way in which disability is understood. Intellectual disability can be represented either as a threat to social order or in such a manner that its disruptive qualities are defused. The qualities that unnerved the Victorians were wide-ranging, including the possible destabilizing of ideologically-based gender characteristics, threats to the bourgeois economic and social order, and even challenges to theological or philosophical orthodoxies on the development and innate qualities of humanity.

An example is in order. In William Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy," Johnny Foy - the title character - is entrusted by his mother Betty to fetch medical assistance for Susan Gale, a neighbour who is very ill. Johnny sets off upon his pony to fetch the doctor, but hours pass and the doctor does not arrive. Betty, imagining the worst, starts to worry more about Johnny than Susan. She then journeys to the doctor's on her own, only to find that Johnny has not arrived. In her anxiety she forgets to ask the doctor to attend to Susan; meanwhile, Susan, worried about Johnny and Betty, recovers from her illness and sets off in search of both.

Johnny is eventually found unharmed, sitting in a grove where his steed is calmly grazing, and the three (Betty, Johnny and Susan) are reunited. The poem is mock-heroic, with Johnny going off on a quest which he does not fulfill to the letter, but through which he is the catalyst for the desired end: Susan's recovery. In that sense, Johnny is also linked to a benevolent nature.

Wordsworth is drawing on the long history of the "holy innocent" in this poem, Johnny being favoured by Providence and granted a closer (albeit not rational) harmony with the natural order. But what is a "holy innocent," and why does the notion exist? Why is the boy so firmly bound to his mother? Why does not the doctor care about Johnny's disappearance? Why would Wordsworth even consider writing this poem? These questions, asked in isolation, can have no clear answers. But in the larger context of representations of intellectual disability, patterns emerge that give the questions greater resonance, and also make it possible to formulate answers.

The idea that people perceived as having intellectual disabilities are somehow granted a greater connection to the natural world or even to God has a long and illustrious heritage (indeed, the term "natural" to designate such a person has almost an equally long lineage). When Paul writes to the Corinthians that "ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise" (II Cor 11:19), he is formally reasserting the bond between God, "fools" and the grace that good Christians can receive by treating fools well. The bond is rearticulated (with appropriate adjustments for historical context) in numerous Elizabethan dramas with "fool" characters and in works such as Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.

This tenacious representation serves a social function: it gives a meaning, a role, to people who otherwise do not seem to have any other reason to occupy a place in society. The role of the holy innocent not only provides a minimal degree of protection for such people in that it gives them a status that protects them somewhat from the callousness of others. It also provides them with a function, rationalizing their presence in society as representatives of a divine (or, later, a natural) plan that is beyond the mundane and practical. Otherwise, they would remain unaccounted for in the social plan, and therefore could be a subversive influence - especially threatening to claims from dominant classes that society operates according to a natural and proper order. For this claim to be perceived as true, everything must fit. The "holy innocent" is one way of making intellectual disability fit.

Betty Foy's relation to Johnny is also significant in that it reinforces the role that women were increasingly expected to play in the family. Wordsworth's poem presents Betty Foy as a mother and housewife (Johnny's father is a woodsman, felling trees away from home), and the picture is uncomplicated for most readers. We accept it at face value - this is what women do, or did at that time, anyway. Yet the role of women was in flux in the eighteenth century, which first saw the division

between "public" and "domestic" spheres of activity. In the poem, Betty Foy is responsible for Johnny as his mother. Susan Gale is symbolically linked with Johnny, because his absence awakens her maternal instincts and "cures" her of her disease. The doctor remains apart because his world, the world of business and medicine, the public, professional sphere of activity, is resolutely masculine, and the disappearance of an idiot boy is clearly a domestic crisis, of interest to mothers but not surrogate fathers - or patriarchs, at any rate - such as physicians. Like Dickens with his heroines 50 years later, Wordsworth presents Betty Foy in a context that appears natural and yet is under ideological construction. Betty Foy is a new version of woman, the domestic mother.

Certainly the microcosm that Wordsworth developed in his poem was one that meant with his approval. It was not, however, an image of his world but rather a fanciful reconstruction of an earlier and more innocent period. "The Idiot Boy" was included in Wordsworth's collaborative effort with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which forged a new direction in English literature, in part by relying heavily on reconstructing older forms of poetry (such as the ballad) and presenting "humbler" subject matter, such as the fast-changing rural life of the English countryside. In placing this narrative in the more seemingly unspoiled world of rural folk, Wordsworth succeeds in giving it greater authority as an example of a proper order. In effect, he naturalizes it.

Did Wordsworth plot out the relationships between the principal characters of the poem to reflect an ideological bias that he endorsed? Such a scenario is possible but not likely. More probably, Wordsworth wrote his poem in a way that seemed to make sense to him. In this instance, he was less likely an active ideologue than a passive subscriber to the notions that he reinscribes in "The Idiot Boy." But the role of women and the place of "the idiot boy" were not uncontested even then. This poem, of all the poems included in *Lyrical Ballads*, received the most critical condemnation, not because of any abstract aesthetic faults that critics perceived in it, but rather because many considered Wordsworth's subject matter at best unfit for poetry, and at worst offensive. That the mother should exhibit such "irrational" love for her son disturbed many readers. However, the woman's place as the domestic "angel of the house," later evident in nineteenth century novels, had not yet been secured. If it had been, there likely would have been less controversy over Betty Foy's response to her son. Then, it should have seemed purely natural and understandable. The notions of intellectual disability and maternal love are here entwined to establish both in an apparently natural order, but Wordsworth's readers were not sufficiently indoctrinated to accept the naturalness of the relationship as later readers would be.

The point of this example is to illustrate only one way that intellectual disability is used in literature, and how the very notion is linked to the ideological

battles of the day. What do such literary representations suggest about the way people perceived as intellectually disabled fit into the world beyond literature? Certainly, an analysis of the shifts in the way the idea of intellectual disability has changed over history, especially across different ideological contexts, should alert us to the unstable nature of the term and make us more critical of the assumptions that accompany it. This is not to argue that some people do not need more help - often significantly more help - than others in managing their day-to-day affairs. To deny this would be absurd and dangerous. However, understanding the shifting significance of the idea of intellectual disability should make one critical of the homogenous responses to the needs of people so designated.

For instance, as I noted earlier, in literature characters with intellectual disability are rarely considered on their own terms so much as in their relationships to other people. The same holds true beyond the text. Intellectual disability is defined in a social context, and the roles assigned to people so designated are social roles governed not necessarily by the desires or needs of the individual, but by the demands of the society in which they live (for example, asylums, promoted as safe educational institutions that would prepare those who could go on in the world and protect those who could not, quickly became a means of separating "deviant" people from the rest of the population for the supposed benefit of the latter). Literature and life are not so far removed, at least so far as the cultural forces acting on them are concerned. By reading critically how people perceived as having intellectual disabilities are represented in art and literature, we may be able to identify certain tendencies that dominate our thinking on the subject. Then we can turn our attention to the policies and practices that govern our interaction with the people we are claiming to assist.

Work Cited

Gilman, Sander. *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: Norton, 1981.