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Fashioning a Feeble Mind: Cognitive Disability in American Fiction, 1830-1940

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Fashioning a Feeble Mind

Cognitive Disability in American Literature, 1830-1940

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Honors Project, Spring 2017

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Introduction

On Thursday, January 29, 2015, Robert Ladd, an intellectually disabled man, was put to death in Texas. In any other state, his execution would have been illegal—his IQ was 67, below the nationally recognized score for cognitive disability. However, until earlier this year Texas decided the fate of inmates facing the death penalty using a unique set of criteria, the Briseño factors¹, partially derived from the character of Lennie in John Steinbeck’s 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men*. These characteristics are used as justification to execute individuals who would usually be declared unable to stand trial due to cognitive disability. The use of Lennie, a fictional character, as a template for legal definitions of contemporary intellectual disability is troubling not only because he is a figment of Steinbeck’s imagination but also because the modern

¹ *Moore v. Texas*, 581 US (2017).

The Briseño factors were struck down by the supreme court earlier this year in *Moore vs Texas* when the supreme court ruled 5-3 that states do not have “unfettered discretion” to decide what constitutes intellectual disability. The factors allowed the Texan Supreme Court to bypass national IQ requirements for the death penalty by stating that anyone who could successfully complete actions such as lying coherently, planning a crime, or interacting socially without drooling could be executed legally.

understanding of cognitive disability in the United States differs greatly from that of the 1930s.² At the time that Steinbeck was writing, the medical community saw cognitive disability as static. Conversely, contemporary medical definitions and symptoms of, and the diagnoses for, cognitive disability are not constant in any way. Not only has the scientific and medical understanding of cognitive disabilities advanced over the past century, but we have also begun to acknowledge that changing social, economic, and political conditions affect the way we conceive of cognitive disability on a societal level.

Literary criticism, like the state of Texas, has also fallen behind the changing medical understanding of cognitive disability; the idea that cognitive disability is monolithic, unchanging, and simple still informs most criticism dealing with fictional characters labeled as cognitively disabled. The conception of cognitive disability as static leads not only to an ignorance of historical disability contexts, but also to the reduction of labeled characters to a pre-determined set of tropes, stereotypes, and symbols.³ The critical assumption that cognitively disabled characters are simply assemblies of tired literary tropes leads critics to disregard these characters—and therefore to ignore large portions of the works in which they appear. While Lennie Small is undoubtedly the central character of *Of Mice and Men*, nearly all criticism is written about George; though Hetty and Judith occupy similar roles in *The Deerslayer*, critics have written nearly exclusively about Judith, often mentioning Hetty as a side

² Furthermore, Steinbeck admits, in his letters to Maria St. Just, that the character of Lennie isn't based on anyone who Steinbeck knew with cognitive disabilities but was adapted from a story he heard about a farmworker who killed his supervisor. This betrays the close association of the period between criminality and cognitive disability.

³ Characters with cognitive disability labels are most often analyzed as symbols of innocence or purity, usually in a religious sense (Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, Steinbeck's Lennie), or as representations of general decay and decline (Faulkner's Benjy).

note before dismissing her.⁴ Because cognitive disability is widely perceived as unchanging, literary critics have overlooked the economic, political, and social influences that continually recreate cognitive disability in the public psyche. This leads critics to assume that cognitively disabled characters are static, truthful representations of cognitive disability independent of the authors' historical context. In this work, I intend to fill the gaps left by past criticism by analyzing cognitively disabled characters in American fiction (1830-1940) within their historical contexts in order to understand how these characters both reflect and shape popular concepts of cognitive disability.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, American fiction is populated by an increasing number of cognitively disabled characters. This increase correlates with growing concerns about treatment and funding for those with cognitive disabilities which eventually results in the popularization of the American eugenics movement. Before 1850, care for the cognitively disabled fell primarily to the family, and, to a lesser degree, to the community. The first state-run asylum in America, which would have housed both those labeled with mental illnesses and with cognitive disabilities, was built in 1842. Though there were privately run asylums before 1842, most of them would have been prohibitively expensive for the average family. Around 1850, institutional reformers and doctors, such as Samuel Gridley Howe, began to build new institutions based on the French Séguin model in the U.S. These groundbreaking educational experiments led by Edward Séguin, a French physician, hoped to "cure" various cognitive disabilities, aiming to institutionalize individuals carrying cognitive

⁴ See articles such as "The Women of Cooper's *Leatherstocking* Tales" by Nina Baym as well as Doyle's "Tragedy and the Non-Teleological in 'Of Mice and Men'" for examples.

disability labels during early life with the goal of community integration by adulthood. For the first time in American history, doctors began claiming to be able to “cure” the cognitively disabled, beginning a drastic shift in the way that cognitive disability was perceived. New institutions were built to house these experiments, and the institutionalized population ballooned quickly as formal medical treatment eclipsed community and family care as the most prevalent method of support for people with cognitive disabilities.

In the 1860s, the heyday of the Séguin schools, American fiction contains characters with cognitive disabilities who are often either cared for by their families until they die young or are “cured” in some way. The depiction of a cure at all is new, but unsurprising given the popularity and missions of the Séguin schools. These narratives reflect the placelessness of individuals with cognitive disabilities within society—at a time when institutionalization with the goal of rehabilitation was the assumed path of individuals with cognitive disabilities, those for whom this path was impossible had no other social placement. The placelessness of individuals with cognitive disabilities makes either death or cure inevitable because there are no other options; once their family can no longer care for them (or fund their institutionalization), they must either disappear or be able to seamlessly join the community.

After the rehabilitation experiments of the 1850s and 1860s failed, the dominant narrative of care changes. Fiction writers begin to depict support from the community, instead of from family or a single benefactor, as the optimal way for those with cognitive disabilities to be provided for. Given the costs of institutionalization to the tax base, the idea of the non-cured but nevertheless self-supporting cognitively disabled individual must have been enticing. The cognitively disabled characters of the 1880s and 1890s contribute to their communities in

ways that subsidize or minimize their care needs. There are also examples of cognitively disabled characters between 1880 and 1895 who do not die, and are neither cured nor institutionalized by the end of their stories. This is the only time period between 1830 and 1940 where this is the case.

The care narrative drastically changes once more between the 1890s and the beginning of the twentieth century, a change which is due to a newfound fear of those with cognitive disabilities created by the American eugenics movement. By 1915, disabled characters no longer contribute meaningfully to their communities. Rather, they become a threat to those around them economically, physically, and sexually. Institutionalization, and later sterilization and euthanasia, became the ways in which medical professionals suggested “caring” for those with cognitive disability labels. The fictional characters of the early twentieth century return to the placelessness experienced by those in novels and stories written before 1870. However, in the early twentieth century, there is no longer any possibility for a cure narrative. Those labeled with cognitive disabilities either die or they are institutionalized; there is no other option. They cannot integrate into society in any way; even living with their families is dismissed as a mode of care. While this return to the placelessness of the mid-nineteenth century is, in some ways, a full circle return to the choice between institutionalization and death present in narratives from that time, the placelessness narrative of the early twentieth century is much more rigid in its depiction of the elimination of the cognitively disabled from the mainstream community.

Notwithstanding differing portrayals of proper care for those with intellectual disabilities, nineteenth and early twentieth century authors of fictional characters with cognitive disabilities relied on a common set of characteristics with which cognitive disability

could be indicated. These include many of the tropes which literary critics have already identified: purity, religiosity, simplicity, and monstrosity. How these traits are applied is mainly decided by the gender of the character in question. Female cognitively disabled characters are traditionally angelic, innocent, harmless victims who are closely connected with God and children. Male characters, on the other hand, are often monstrous: animalistic and physically threatening. While these stereotypes are straightforward, and, let's be honest, boring and repetitive, their combinations during particular historical moments reveal much about the conception of cognitive disability at the moment when they were written. The presence of angelic men or monstrous women, for instance, points to an inversion of the status quo. Even the presence of higher numbers of one gender or the other is a telling moment—more women (more angels, as it were) tend to appear at moments when community integration is the dominant ideal. Men, in their animalistic terror, are more prevalent in time periods where popular support is on the side of segregation (or elimination) from the mainstream community. Looking at patterns within oft-dismissed stereotypes, it is obvious that, while the images used to portray cognitive disability are stable, the understanding of the concept they describe constantly changes.

Understanding of cognitive disability throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not only informed by literary tropes and gender, but also by race. Due to racist pseudo-science, which elevated whites above all other races, writers often used comparison to non-white races to indicate the presence of cognitive disability within white characters.⁵ Hetty's

⁵ Many of the diagnostic criteria we currently use, such as IQ tests, were designed and tailored during this period to reinforce ideas of white supremacy through the development of cognitive disability diagnoses.

ability to survive with the Huron nation and Benjy's acceptance at the black church he attends with Dilsey both exemplify moments at which likeness to non-white races is figured as a characteristic of cognitive disability. At this point, it is important to note that all the characters and authors that I analyze are white. This was not a purposeful decision, but is rather the product of an extensive search for characters carrying cognitive disability labels in which I found no characters or authors of color.⁶ It is possible that cognitive disability was a predominantly white preoccupation at this point; I think it is more likely that these characters are harder to find because the language which was used during this time period to describe cognitive disability in whites was derived from comparisons to other races. Descriptions of cognitive disability from 1830-1940 are coded in terms of racial and class-based hierarchy which eventually become diagnostic criteria for the first modern disability labels. White characters are marked as disabled by comparisons to and companionship with people of color, particularly black people and Native Americans. I believe it is possible that cognitively disabled characters of color and their authors are difficult to find precisely because they fall beyond the usual search terms, because they had to be distinguished using different language than that which defined white cognitive disability. Because the cognitive disability of white characters is so often described through comparison to other races, cognitive disability in non-white races would require a different set of descriptors. This is a place where there is an acute need for more research.

⁶ I did find many authors of color writing about physical disability or mental illness and many characters labeled with such conditions. While there is a lot of historical overlap between diagnoses of mental illness and cognitive disability, I will, for the purposes of this paper, be focusing only on conditions understood specifically as cognitive disability within the time period in question so as to avoid retrospective and anachronistic diagnosis.

Drawing on a variety of historical primary sources, such as medical journals, popular non-fiction works, eugenic propaganda pamphlets, and newspaper articles, in this work I examine the influences of both popular and medical conceptions of cognitive disability on works of American fiction containing characters which fit historical labels for cognitive disability. I analyze a handful of characters with cognitive disabilities, ranging from the relatively unknown, such as Ellee Angevine, a character from "The Dumb Girl" by James Kirke Paulding, to some of the most famous cognitively disabled characters in American fiction, like Benjy Compson and Lennie Small. Through this analysis, I argue that these characters, their treatment and traits, not only reflect the medical and social beliefs about cognitive disability of their times, but also shape that of the future, providing language and examples which are used to popularize and define new medical and legal understandings of cognitive disability.

Chapter 1

Gendered Archetypes of Cognitive Disability, 1830-1850

Cognitively disabled characters in nineteenth and early twentieth century American fiction are, for the most part, formed through varying combinations of stereotypes. These stereotypes include animalistic, threatening, or overly physical behavior, but also purity, religiosity, cognitive simplicity, innocence, closeness to nature, and an inability to control the body. While combinations of these tropes vary between time periods, depending on the dominant discourse of cognitive disability, they are fairly strictly gendered. Women or girls with cognitive disabilities tend to show moral and religious signs of cognitive disability; they are often angelic, innocent, pure, and “simple.” While male characters often have these traits as well, they are more strictly defined by bodily characteristics, through descriptions of brute strength, unnerving facial expressions, drooling, and unintentional violence. These characters are often literally larger than life, portrayed as hulking, impossibly strong, physically threatening but well-intentioned men whose base instincts to protect themselves often lead to accidental violence. While they may share some of the moral-religious signs as well, often being excessively innocent or morally pure, these characteristics take a backseat to their physicality.

Variance from the dominant characteristics of male and female cognitively disabled characters becomes meaningful when understood along with contemporary historical social and medical theories of cognitive disability.

Medical theories of cognitive disability before 1850 were not nearly as scientific or well defined as they are now. As Peter Tylor points out in “‘Denied the Power to Choose the Good’: Sexuality and Mental Defect in American Medical Practice, 1850-1920,” diagnoses of cognitive disability “were based on social performance” of “normal” behavior, especially sexual behavior. This means that “there is no way to establish whether the majority of the institutional populations were actually [cognitively disabled]” given that what was defined as “non-normal” behavior and used as diagnostic criteria (for example, pre-marital sex) has no relevance to today’s diagnostic standards for cognitive disability.⁷ Nevertheless, rudimentary ideas about the origin of cognitive disability, its progression, and the possibilities of treatment existed within the scientific community. Tylor summarizes medical thought surrounding cognitive disability during this time period:

[Cognitive disability was defined] as a condition, not a disease, that could be ameliorated but never entirely cured. [Physicians] believed [those with cognitive disabilities] had suffered some physical lesion which prevented them from developing, first their perceptual senses, and then from acquiring the faculties of will, reason, judgment, or intelligence. The antecedents of this defective condition were believed to be either hereditary predisposition, or accidental causes such as childhood illness or neurological injury. Little could be done to prevent accident, but the hereditary predispositions, which were thought to be the result of inherited constitutional weakness, could be substantially eliminated by parental obedience to the natural laws of health.⁸

⁷ Peter L. Tylor. “‘Denied the Power to Choose the Good’: Sexuality and Mental Defect in American Medical Practice, 1850-1920,” *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 4 (summer, 1997): 474.

⁸ Tylor, “‘Denied the Power to Choose the Good,’” 474.

In short, early nineteenth century medical thought blamed parental deviance from behavioral norms for the cognitive disability of their children. Within this scheme, what we now recognize as different types of cognitive disability did not exist; the term “idiocy” was used to describe nearly any type of non-physical deviance.⁹ Thus, idiocy became a catch-all diagnosis used to shame parents into behaving according to “physicians’ norms of moderation and self-control.”¹⁰

However, throughout the 1830s and 1840s there was a wide gulf between the medical and social discourses surrounding cognitive disability. While the medical discourses focused on “inherited constitutional weakness” and the “amelioration” of symptoms, social discourse remained religious, looking to God as a starting point for discussions of the causes of cognitive disability as well as for answers as to the social place of those with cognitive disabilities. An editorial published in the *True American* newspaper in 1846 outlines ability as God-given:

The man of intellect often regards with contempt the slow-witted and feeble-minded. How quickly will the question of the old book set this matter right with every right-minded man! The truth is that we all ought to consider it, [carefully] and habitually, that for all a man has of wealth, honor, personal accomplishments, or mental qualities, he has not the slightest ground for pride or self-complacency; inasmuch as all that he has is the free gift of divine providence.¹¹

This view transforms cognitive disability from a product of parental misbehavior into a “free gift” of God. It becomes, instead of a point of shame, simply a fact of that individual’s life as ordained by God. The social definition of cognitive disability between 1830 and 1850, then, is

⁹ With the exception of conditions which have physical markers, such as microcephaly and Downs syndrome.

¹⁰ Tylor, “Denied the Power to Choose the Good,” 474.

¹¹ “Who Maketh Thee to Differ?” *True American* (Lexington, KY), Feb. 2, 1846.

one which is directly opposed to that of the medical community; it absolves the parents of blame rather than prescribing it to them.

These contrasting ideas come into contact in James Paulding's 1830 story "The Dumb Girl." While the title character, Phoebe, is "dumb," or mute (having lost her tongue in an accident), it her brother, Ellee, who is cognitively disabled. He is, in many ways, the male cognitive disability archetype. He drools and moans and growls; he is physically threatening. He is also harmless, well-intentioned, and protective of his family. His parentage is ambiguous; his father is lazy but is also a former Revolutionary soldier; his mother is well meaning but oblivious: the narrator hints at parental blame but it is always tempered by respect for the parents' positive traits. Ellee, for much of the story, seems to be directed as a sort of guardian angel to his sister, following her and attempting to protect her from her ne'er-do-well suitor. The story, in its depiction of the competing medical and social definitions of cognitive disability, is filled with unarticulated anxieties about the causes of cognitive disability and the place of the cognitively disabled individual within society.

Paulding's narrative is convoluted and strange. It begins with an explanation of the Angevine family—the Revolutionary soldier-father; the overworked, well-intentioned mother; and the two siblings who, regardless of their varying abilities, share a strong bond. Phoebe, the sister, is mute but beautiful and able to communicate with her eyes. Ellee is cognitively disabled. At the outset of the story, Phoebe begins a courtship with Walter Avery, the local bad boy. Eventually, it becomes obvious that she is pregnant, and that Avery has no intention to marry her. Phoebe ends up attempting suicide by throwing herself in a river. Ellee, who follows Phoebe everywhere, is the only witness to the event, but, due to his disabilities, is able only to

try to mimic it. Ellee's attempts at communication leads the townspeople to believe that Avery murdered Phoebe and, while he is not convicted by a court, he is exiled from public life. Ellee's mother eventually dies, and Ellee ends up in the care of his uncle until his early death. After Ellee dies, the narrator reveals that Phoebe didn't, in fact, die when she was thrown in the river, that she traveled downstream and was taken in by another group. She returns with Avery's child in time to marry Avery on his death bed. Paulding's story whose plot is driven by the communication of two people who are, supposedly, unable to communicate at all.

The moments at which Ellee fulfills the trope of the man with cognitive disabilities are marked by references to animals and instinct. Paulding initially describes Ellee as having "a strong heart, though he had no head; his affections were singularly strong; his reason but a little beyond instinct."¹² Paulding goes on to describe Ellee's vocalizations as having "a singularly wild note...not unlike the low, distant whoop of the owl" and later compares him to a peacock and "a dog watching its master."¹³ Paulding's descriptions of Ellee's attempts to communicate, often during states of agitation, are also animalistic in nature—often marked by his gnashing of his teeth, foaming at the mouth, and the prolonged production of the "low and plaintive quaver."¹⁴ Ellee embodies the masculine physical stereotypes of cognitive disability.

His actions do not, however, always line up with these descriptions. For example, Ellee is able, after his sister disappears from her walk with her suitor, Walter Avery, to communicate

¹² James Kirke Paulding, "The Dumb Girl" in *Tales of the Good Woman* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 197.

¹³ Paulding, "The Dumb Girl," 209, 218.

¹⁴ Paulding, "The Dumb Girl," 221.

what he has seen, or what he suspects he has seen, through silent play-acting of the sequence of events:

Ellee led us to the place where the river rolled rapidly around the sharp angle of the rock, and there again began the most violent course of gesticulation. He pointed to the roots of an old branching sycamore, then twined his arms about my body and kissed me, then wrung his hands, and imitated weeping as well as he could, and finally ran moaning to the river's bank, and making as if he would cast himself in, howled most piteously while he pointed to the deep current rolling past.¹⁵

In his non-verbal description of the scene, Ellee is able to fully understand and attempt to communicate what happened between Walter Avery and Phoebe that caused her to attempt to commit suicide. This is inconsistent with his having “no head.”¹⁶ It is not Ellee's fault that the townspeople eventually believe that Walter murdered Phoebe, as the description of his testimony clearly states that he acted “as if he would throw himself in.”¹⁷ The wrongful assumption of Phoebe's murder here is not on his hands, but rather on the hands of his interpreters, which he is then helpless to correct.

Ellee's inability to represent the truth of his sister's attempted suicide, to act as witness, is further examined in the explanation of Walter's trials—both legal and social. While “the dumb testimony of Ellee was so vague and unsatisfactory, that the grand jury, while in their hearts they believed Walter guilty, declined to find an indictment,” Ellee's apparent hatred of Walter, his repeated attempts to “assail him violently,” were enough “in the eyes of all the neighborhood... [to convict him] as a murderer and seducer.”¹⁸ Ellee's ability to inspire a form

¹⁵ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 221.

¹⁶ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 197.

¹⁷ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 221.

¹⁸ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 223.

of community justice against the man who impregnated and then abandoned his sister, causing her to attempt suicide, is a representation of the social understanding of cognitive disability: it is his disability which *allows* Ellee to witness his sister's wrongful treatment. The disability itself is why Ellee follows Phoebe "like a dog...its master," eventually leading to his witness of and misinterpreted testimony about her seduction and attempted suicide. At one point, Paulding even describes Ellee as the "guardian genius of his sister."¹⁹ Given that the social definition of cognitive disability in the 1830s rested on God meaningfully bestowing cognitive disability for a purpose, Ellee's ability to witness and testify puts him within this definition. If Ellee's disability is the work of God in order to communicate the wrongdoing of Walter Avery to the townspeople, then Ellee's cognitive disability falls within the social construction. However, Ellee's inability to become the messenger—seen in the townspeople's misinterpretation of his testimony—complicates the comparison. What good is a messenger if they can't expose the truth?

Paulding further muddles the social and medical constructions of disability through the discussion of Ellee's parentage. Ellee's father, Angevine, is described as "a brave soldier" who served "during the whole [Revolutionary] War" though "rather an idle man" who "died as he lived, in fun; giving his pipe to one, his tobacco-box to another, his odd-knee buckles to a third; and bequeathing his Testament, which he knew by heart, to my uncle, in payment of his rent."²⁰ This description teeters between the honorable and the idle, between soldierly valor, religious fervor, and simple laziness. Paulding's description of Ellee's mother is similarly

¹⁹ Paulding, "The Dumb Girl," 210.

²⁰ Paulding, "The Dumb Girl," 195-196.

ambiguous. While she is first described as an “honest, careful, industrious woman,” her unobservant nature is a contributing factor in the development of Walter and Phoebe’s courtship.²¹ Even after Phoebe attempts suicide, the mother ends up ignoring Ellee’s attempts to communicate it to her:

[Ellee] ran to and fro; pointed to the spot...and attempted to drag his mother violently towards it, gnashing his teeth and actually foaming at the mouth all the while. At length [Ellee] sat down in a corner and commenced that strange melancholy moaning, which was the only sound he ever uttered. Labour and poverty harden the heart. The mother thought strange of this behavior at first; but she was busy at work, and her mind became gradually drawn off from the poor boy.²²

The major failings of both Ellee’s mother and father legitimize the medical view, falling within the limits of the “abuse and indulgence” doctors pointed to as markers of hereditary cognitive disability (especially within poorer families, such as the Angevines).²³ “The Dumb Girl,” then, presents a view of disability which teeter-totters between the social and medical, betraying the unavoidable conflicts between the two.

The unresolved conflict between the social and medical constructions of disability within “The Dumb Girl” come to a head in the discussion of the Angevine family’s care for Ellee. As previously argued, Ellee is simultaneously portrayed as a burden to his family and as a sort of guardian angel to his sister. That it is his family’s responsibility to care for him is never doubted: once his immediate family all either dies or disappears, he moves onto being his uncle’s charge. At his uncle’s, Ellee is described as “exhibiting in his profound devotion to his benefactor, a libel

²¹ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 198.

²² Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 220.

²³ Tylor, “Denied the Power to Choose the Good,” 474.

on human reason, which ought to hide its head in shame, when told that dogs and idiots transcend it in gratitude”; this description does nothing but enforce the idea that family responsibility is the proper solution for care for the cognitively disabled.²⁴ The death of Ellee’s family, then, narratively necessitates Ellee’s death “of a sort of premature old age three years subsequently,” for where will he go when his uncle can no longer care for him?²⁵ Ellee’s strange, early, narratively convenient death is indicative of the placelessness of individuals with cognitive disabilities in American society at this point. Because the social definition of disability relies on its construction as the “gift of God” (and therefore denies any sort of parental blame in the matter), while the medical definition is established upon exactly that sort of blame, the role of the community in care for the cognitively disabled is left undiscussed and the cognitively disabled are left without a place in the community. The result of this is that it is impossible for a cognitively disabled character to survive without a familial support system.

The placelessness within the community which necessitates Ellee’s death is even more evident in the example of Hetty Hutter, a female cognitively disabled character in James Fenimore Cooper’s 1841 novel *The Deerslayer*. Within this first installment of *The Leatherstocking Tales*,²⁶ the social and medical constructions of disability are hashed out on center stage as the audience confronts a cognitively disabled character who is simultaneously blessed by God and a product of her mother’s sexual misconduct. Hetty also embodies the female counterpoint to the animalistic, occasionally violent male archetype of cognitive disability between 1830 and 1850: she is godly, innocent, and non-threatening. Hetty is

²⁴ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 224.

²⁵ Paulding, “The Dumb Girl,” 224.

²⁶ Though it was not written first, *The Deerslayer* is the first book in the *Leatherstocking* series.

precisely this sort of character: she reads her bible when things are going wrong; she has an incredibly strong trust in God; she is highly protective of her own virtue; and she has a simplistic and unquestioned moral compass. Cooper even describes her in exactly these terms:

An idiot she could not properly be termed, her mind being just enough enfeebled to lose most of those traits that are connected with the more artful qualities, and to retain its ingenuousness and love of truth. It had often been remarked of this girl...that her perception of the right seemed almost intuitive, while her aversion to the wrong formed so distinctive a feature of her mind as to surround her with an atmosphere of pure morality; peculiarities that are not infrequent with persons who are termed feeble-minded; as if God had forbidden the evil spirits to invade a precinct so defenseless, with the benign purpose of extending a direct protection to those, who had been left without the usual aids of humanity.²⁷

In her godliness, Hetty is both performing the role of the woman with cognitive disabilities and fulfilling the social construction of the same. She is protected by God, a special creature of unparalleled innocence, who, at instances, even becomes angelic or priest like, bestowing prayers and sermons, as well as blessings from her deathbed.²⁸ In her role as moral compass, Hetty presides over the novel's central conflict between the Hurons and the white men on Ostego Lake (also known as the Glimmerglass), intervening when her straightforward ethics have been breached and refereeing the ongoing hostilities. Hetty's moral and spiritual gifts are, indeed, God-given, in trade for her cognitive ability; as Cooper points out, it is indeed "as if God had forbidden the evil spirits to invade a precinct so defenseless."²⁹ God is, clearly, the giver of ability and, if we read the last lines of the novel as particularly pertaining to Hetty, he gives varying abilities based on the needs of the population at the time:

²⁷ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer or, The First Warpath* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 66.

²⁸ See examples on pages 9, 193, 325, 367, and throughout Hetty's death scene on pages 528-535.

²⁹ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 66.

We live in a world of transgressions and selfishness, and no pictures that represent us otherwise can be true, though, happily, for human nature, gleamings of that pure spirit in whose likeness man has been fashioned, are to be seen relieving its deformities, and mitigating if not excusing its crimes.³⁰

Given Hetty's place in the novel as moral compass, as priest, as devotee of the bible and representative of its word, it is easy to see her as the "gleamings of that pure spirit." Hetty is, for all her capability, doing the work of God on the edge of civilization where neither the Hurons nor the white men welcome it.

Hetty's piety embodies both the social construction of disability between 1830 and 1850 and the archetypical traits of female characters with cognitive disabilities. These archetypical traits have not gone completely undiscussed in Cooper criticism; they have, however, overshadowed more complex analysis of Hetty's character. In Nina Baym's article "The Women of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales," Baym defines Hetty and her sister Judith as one unit, "the unmarriageable";³¹ Sandra Tomc in "James Fenimore Cooper and the Flat Frontier" mentions Hetty only by way of her "dangerously simpleminded faith in the literal enactment of instructions she finds in the bible."³² Chad May offers an insightful evaluation of this sort of criticism when he points out that

the intention has been to put the sisters in strong contrast; one admirable in person, clever, filled with the pride of beauty, erring and fallen; the other, barely provided with sufficient capacity to know good from evil, instinct, notwithstanding, with the virtues of woman, reverencing and loving God.³³

³⁰ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 548.

³¹ Nina Baym, "The Women of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (Dec. 1971): 705.

³² Sandra Tomc, "'Clothes Upon Sticks': James Fenimore Cooper and the Flat Frontier," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 154-55.

³³ Chad May, "The Romance of America: Trauma, National Identity, and the Leatherstocking Tales," *Early American Studies* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 176.

He goes on to argue that “Leatherstocking’s preference for the simplicity of...Hetty...[reflects] the moral superiority of his central character.”³⁴ However interesting this critique is, it falls flat as May proceeds to view the Hutter sisters as no more than a moral backdrop against which Deerslayer can advance.³⁵ Hetty has, over and over again, been relegated to the level of moral compass against which others can be judged, mentioned as comparison but never discussed in her own right.

In repeatedly reducing Hetty to the novel’s moral compass, *Deerslayer* critics ignore the ways in which Hetty repeatedly breaks the bounds of white womanhood they themselves define. A repeated theme in *Deerslayer* criticism is the assertion that Cooper depicts white women as being unable to fend for themselves in the wilderness. Baym exemplifies this strain of criticism when she writes

Indian women fend for themselves and do quite well at it; white women appear in the forest so weighted down with the appurtenances of their cultural role— heavy veils, cumbersome and constricting clothing, satin slippers—that self-defense is out of the question.³⁶

Tomc also participates in this rhetoric when she declares that “none of these [female] characters is, properly speaking, a ‘natural’ creature, and thus none of them can form a lasting affiliation with the ‘natural’ land.”³⁷ These critics ignore Hetty’s interactions with nature

³⁴ May, “The Romance of America,” 176.

³⁵ May, “The Romance of America,” 184.

³⁶ Nina Baym, “The Women of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales,” 701.

³⁷ Tomc, “Clothes Upon Sticks,” 154.

An important note: this assertion follows a discussion of Judith’s claims to the lake which makes no mention of Hetty. Tomc does, however, claim that “Judith’s claims to Ostego Lake must be foreclosed because she is not a proper creature of the ‘woods,’ as her love of sartorial finery and the garrison life attest...Cooper insists that [these tastes] ... are genetically inherited from her mother” (153). While Judith might seem to echo her mother’s tastes for

entirely—indeed, throughout the novel she is able to move through nature however she would like. A particularly notable moment comes when Hetty abandons the rest of the party in the night, sleeping in the forest and waking to the presence of a mother bear and her cubs who travel with her until she comes close to a Huron settlement (172). At a later point, she is described moving through nature: “The girl took no pains to conceal her movements. Any ingenious expedient of this nature quite likely exceeded her powers; still her step was habitually light, and scarcely audible” (310). She is not encumbered with finery, as Judith is in the final scene, but wears simple clothing without ornament. She is, undoubtedly, both able to survive and thrive in nature. Cooper describes Hetty as having “reason...fitter for the woods than for the settlements” and, when she dies, her final burial place is in Glimmerglass Lake itself, where she undoubtedly forms a “lasting affiliation with the natural land.”³⁸ Hetty is, as Judith is not, strongly and intuitively connected to the land and the lake.

Not only is Hetty connected to the land and the Glimmerglass, but the position which her cognitive disability places her in makes her dependent on that particular area for her survival. Hetty, with her “reason...fitter for the woods” also has a “heart...fitter for the settlements.”³⁹ Hutter’s three-person civilization on Ostego Lake is the only place where Hetty’s need for a balance between the woods and the settlements can be met. The moment at which the Glimmerglass is taken away from her—when she and Judith no longer have a male willing to stay and protect them—Hetty dies at the hands of the white soldiers; in other words, she

finery (which, importantly, she gives up later in life), Hetty shows no inclination throughout the entire novel towards finery of any kind.

³⁸ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 93.

Tomc, “Clothes Upon Sticks,” 154.

³⁹ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 93.

dies as soon as she encounters mass “civilization.” The Glimmerglass, in its liminality as a space in transition from Indian territory to white territory, is both a mirror of Hetty and the only setting in which she can thrive. It is a setting which allows her innocence, simplicity, and connection to God to flourish while protecting her from the influences of men which corrupted both her mother and Judith.

Hetty’s overlooked relationship with the land betrays the ways in which mid-nineteenth century constructions of cognitive disability relied on racial comparisons and stereotypes. While Paulding defines Ellee’s disability through association with animals, Hetty’s is discussed through a series of racial evaluations. Indeed, when the doctor describes Hetty on her deathbed at the end of the novel, he diagnoses her with “a mind beneath the level of her race.”⁴⁰ Hetty, as previously discussed, is untouched by the boundaries that “civilization” has constructed around the other white women within the *Leatherstocking* series. Further, she moves freely between the Huron settlement and her own friends—something no one else is capable of doing. On the two different occasions when she falls into the Iroquois camp, first when she goes to read the bible to them and then later when she sets out to free Deerslayer, she is never in any danger from the tribe, despite the fact that they have already scalped her adoptive father. Hetty declares, “The Hurons have never harmed me, nor do I think they ever will” and later calls them “kind and harmless.”⁴¹ It is later said that the Hurons “feel for people in [Hetty’s] condition.”⁴² Hetty is even caught leaving camp as prisoner by a Huron lookout who proceeds to let her go.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 527.

⁴¹ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 350, 460.

⁴² Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 399.

⁴³ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 310.

Hetty's unparalleled ability to move between the obviously racially drawn lines of war on the Glimmerglass points to her unique transcendence of race in a text which is almost wholly concerned with it. While Deerslayer and Hetty have many conversations about Deerslayer's ideas about racial "virtues," Hetty repeatedly rejects them, opting instead to simply hold all to the standards of what is written in her bible. Hetty treats her step-father, her love interest Hurry-Harry, Deerslayer, and the Hurons the same way when they have transgressed her own moral code—by sitting them down and reading a biblical passage to them. In these actions, Hetty exists in between the Hurons and the white settlers, without a concrete place in either society.

The construction of the white cognitively disabled mind as "beneath the level of [the white] race" further plays out in the lengthy discussion of Hetty and Judith's heritage. As the reader learns about Hetty and Judith's parents' culturally non-normative behavior throughout the book—the daughters' birth out of wedlock; their real but unknown father; their step-father Tom Hutter's questionable behavior; and their mother's late conversion to religion—it becomes obvious that Hetty's disability is caused, at least in part, by this social degeneration. While God may be acting through her, she is also a punishment for her parents' social transgressions. While she embodies the social construction of disability, she is a product of the medical. She has a "mind beneath the level of her race" specifically *because* her parents' social behavior flaunted those "white virtues," such as monogamy and chivalrous conduct, which Deerslayer goes on and on about (and which correspond to those laid out by Tylor in "Denied the Power to Choose the Good"). Tylor states that by the end of the nineteenth century, "sexual sins...were at once the causes and effects of hereditary disability";⁴⁴ this is obviously enacted even early on in the

⁴⁴ Tylor, "Denied the Power to Choose the Good," 473.

nineteenth century, as we can see in the ways Cooper links Judith's sexual behavior and Hetty's cognitive disability to the premarital sex of their mother. Sexual sins, have, in this case, begun a line of racial disintegration, evidenced by Hetty's cognitive disability, which Judith will potentially continue in her alluded to eventual role as a soldier's mistress.

The fact that Hetty cannot survive once the homestead on the Glimmerglass comes into contact with mainstream society drives home the disintegration of Cooper's racial cognitive. Like Ellee, Hetty becomes placeless when her step-father Tom Hutter dies because her sister Judith, as a single woman, is unable to protect or provide for her; more importantly, Hetty is placeless without the particular piece of land she has survived on, a piece which balances precariously between Indian territory and white civilization. When the garrison shows up to save Deerslayer from the Hurons, Hetty is the casualty; she is mistakenly hit by a stray bullet, because she cannot survive in white society. How is a woman who has a "heart...fitter for the settlements than for the woods...[and] reason...fitter for the woods than for the settlements" going to survive once her home in the woods is taken away? Hetty can only live in a sort of limbo between the woods and the settlements which, in *The Deerslayer*, corresponds to the Huron territory and the white frontier. While Ellee has no care options within the community he grew up in, Hetty has no community to turn to at all. In a society where the medical and social constructions of cognitive disability don't meet, the place of the cognitively disabled character is permanently undecided.

Chapter 2

Race-Based Cure Narratives, 1850-1861

By 1861, the narrative of cognitive disability in the United States had changed drastically from that of Ellee and Hetty. The conversation surrounding disability in the 1830s and 1840s revolved around the incompatibility of the two dominant conceptions of cognitive disability: the medical, which stressed the roles of heredity and parental misbehavior; and the social, which argued that cognitive disabilities were purposeful gifts from God. By the end of the 1850s, this clash was no longer part of the dialogue surrounding cognitive disability, the medical conception having eclipsed the social. This change was, for the most part, due to the widespread popularity of the work of Édward Séguin. Séguin was a French physician and educator who opened the first school for the cognitively disabled in Paris around 1840. He championed education for the “feeble-minded,” basing his methods off previous French institutions for deaf-mutes and the case study of Victor of Aveyron, also known as “the Wild Child.”⁴⁵ Séguin moved to the United States in 1863, but his methods had caught on in the

⁴⁵ Victor of Aveyron was a child who was abandoned in the wilderness and found at the age of 12. He was brought to French physician Jean Itard, who developed techniques to teach him language.

medical community long before he had arrived, and institutions based on his own were already in existence in the United States. The mission of these institutions was to train and educate those with cognitive disabilities to do low-skill labor so that they could then support themselves within the community for the rest of their lives. One such institution was the New York Asylum for Idiots, opened in 1858 in Syracuse. Its mission statement summarizes the beliefs of Séguin's followers well:

In almost all cases, and with very few, if any exceptions, those usually called idiots, under the age of twelve or fifteen, may be so trained and instructed as to render them useful to themselves and fitted to learn some of the ordinary trades, or to engage in agriculture. (5)

This is an extraordinary change from the rhetoric of fifteen years earlier: no longer is the person labeled with cognitive disability a static individual with no place in the community or economy except as a part of their own family. They are, instead, to be removed from their home to an institution where they will be taught to work with the goal of reentrance to and full participation in their original community. The Séguin-inspired schools, for the first time, offered a cure narrative of cognitive disability.

These Séguin-inspired schools were extremely expensive to run. Initial estimates of the cost per patient per year were roughly \$156 (about \$4,600 now), but these estimates didn't account for money spent to build the institution or for its upkeep.⁴⁶ These schools' budgets were also calculated assuming that a certain number of the patients would be coming from families that had the ability to pay for their keep to offset the costs of those coming from poor

⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, March 5, 1853, Pro-quest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*.

backgrounds. For an institution hoping to house 100 patients, the estimated annual cost was about \$10,000 (now about \$300,000) with an assumed 40% of patients paying out of pocket to be treated. Institutions were, therefore, present in the public eye because of their constant need to garner support for federal funding. The successes of these schools were well documented and publicized both in books and periodicals, as well as through public meetings given by asylum administrators in order to increase public awareness and support. The *New York Times* covered one of these meetings, attended by representatives of five newly formed New England institutions in 1857, and summarized it as such:

The object of the meeting was to organize an association for the purpose of bringing the subject of Idiocy before the people, discussing questions of interest and methods of treatment relative to this unfortunate class.

As a result of these discussions, which were purely practical, certain principles were adopted which the intelligent reader will readily appreciate.

1. Idiots may be made producers of at least as much as they consume.
2. To reach such a point, they must be placed, at a suitable age, under judicious medical management, in an institution adapted to their peculiar condition.
3. Physical training is the basis of mental development and culture.
4. The results of training in Institutions for imbeciles in this country and in Europe, prove that, considering the starting point of Idiots compared with other classes of unfortunates, the success of these institutions is at least equal in good results with others.
5. It is the duty of legislators to provide means for the creation and endowment of institutions for this purpose, as it was their duty to provide Common Schools for the poor, Homes of Refuge for the depraved youth, Prisons for malefactors, Hospitals for the insane, Asylums for the blind, deaf-mutes, &c.⁴⁷

There are mentions of similar meetings in the diaries of private citizens as well. On December 19th of 1855, Charlotte Forten Grimké, a well-known black poet and teacher, noted in her diary that

⁴⁷ *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1857.

This afternoon Mr. M[ay] gave us an interesting lecture on the Idiot Schools. He eloquently portrayed the good and noble qualities necessary for the faithful teacher of an idiot school,—the untiring devotion, the self-sacrificing spirit, possessed in an eminent degree by every truly successful teacher in these schools especially. Other teachers have only to *train* the minds of their pupils;—the teacher of an idiot may be said to *make* the mind before training it—he may almost be said to *create* the materials which he is to work upon... if he is successful, [greater] should be the credit awarded to him.⁴⁸

It is important to note here that Charlotte Forten Grimké was also a prominent abolitionist, and that Mr. [Samuel] May went on to give a speech about abolition the next day. Samuel May was a prominent women’s rights activist, abolitionist, and education reformer from Syracuse (where the New York Asylum for Idiots would open three years later). In typical nineteenth century fashion, institutional reform for the cognitively disabled was deeply tied to other progressive movements, and arguments for it were often intertwined with those for other causes in order to broaden the platform for both. These arguments, like those for abolition, often used religious reasoning as their basis. The *Twenty Second Annual Report for the Trustees of the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth*, published in 1870, framed the necessity of helping those with cognitive disability labels as such:

[The institution’s] existence implies faith in God, trust in humanity, obedience to Jesus Christ. Faith that God endowed all his creatures with the capacity for improvement and upward growth; trust in human power to develop and favor that growth; obedience in Christ, who forbade hiding even a poor, single talent in a napkin, and commanded us to do, for the least favored ones of our kind what we would do even unto Him.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Charlotte Forten Grimké, *The Diaries of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 77. Emphasis Grimké’s.

⁴⁹ Lewis Allan, Josiah Bartlett, Francis Bird, James Congdon, Henry Denny, Samuel Eliot, John Flint, Samuel Howe, Edward Jarvis, Edwin Morton, Robert Storer, Emory Wasburn, “Twenty Second Annual Report of the Trustees of the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth,” (Boston: Wright, Potter and State Printers, 1870), 4.

This is a drastic change from the religious arguments of the 1830s and 1840s, in which the disability itself was given by God and any difficulty that the individual experienced due to it would be balanced out by blessings in a different portion of their life; while this argument provided a positive view of cognitive disability, it also removed any responsibility from the community, since God would take care of everything. In contrast, the new religious arguments for schools for those with disability labels implied that their students were *part* of the community, and that, therefore, their care was the responsibility of the community as a whole. Though religious arguments weren't as prevalent in the 1850s and 1860s as they were in the 1830s and 1840s, they were, nonetheless, a key component in the definition of the place of the cognitively disabled within society.

The need for public funding and political will to build such institutions led to the education of the community in the medical discourse of cognitive disability through presentations like that of Mr. May, as well as newspaper articles and religious appeals. As the public was educated and requests for state funds were granted, the cognitively disabled slowly became the responsibility of the community, not just of their families. In order to garner public support for institutions supporting the cognitively disabled, leaders and officials from such institutions argued that the cognitively disabled were as much the responsibility of their communities as deaf-mutes and the insane were (groups already receiving public funding for their support). In this way, the responsibility for the care of the cognitively disabled moves from the family, where it lay for Hetty and Ellee, to the wider community.

This phenomenon had the effect of uniting the social and medical understandings of disability in a common goal after years of conflict. In order to provide strong arguments for the

legitimacy of their schools and the need to fund them, proponents of institutions engaged the public and created a cohesive medical/social understanding of cognitive disability for the first time in the U.S. Rather than a narrative of clash between the medical and social conceptions of cognitive disability, the new dominant narrative was rooted in race-based, highly political depictions of progress and cure. The mission of Séguin-esque institutions to ameliorate disability to the point of self-support needed a drastically different type of literary character to support it—one who is “cured” by institutionalization. For this cure to be positive, the old social conception of disability as God-given and purposeful had to be done away with. Narratives which support “cure” therefore often include a religious awakening which accompanies the treatment of cognitive disability. Cognitive disability then becomes a moral problem, and its cure is painted in terms of developing morality. Characters within this “cure” narrative often progress from “feeble-mindedness” (accompanied by immoral or criminal behavior) to “normal” ability (accompanied by religiosity and extreme morality) through the intervention of benevolent (white) benefactors. Narratives of cognitive disability are also, for the first time, overtly economic and political. These new narratives depict both the emergence of the cognitively disabled from dependence to independence and from blackness to whiteness. Such narratives require an imperfect but “curable” cognitively disabled character, meaning that they must be high-functioning and that their disability must have environmental, not religious or genetic, causes.

Rebecca Harding Davis’ novella “Life in the Iron Mills” provides exactly such a character in Deborah, the woman whom the narrator follows throughout the narrative. At the beginning of the story, Deborah fits none of the literary conventions of cognitive disability and femininity

cataloged in the previous chapter. She is, instead, rough, instinct-driven, and smothered, waiting for removal from poverty for her “brain full of unawakened power” to develop.⁵⁰ She carries physical markers of disability as well, a hunchback and a “dead, vacant look.”⁵¹ Her only point of similarity to Ellee and Hetty exists within comparisons to animals: she watches her love interest Hugh like “a spaniel its master,” she sleeps in “kennel-like” rooms, and she is compared to a “drowned cat.”⁵² Importantly, she is not an anomaly within a community of the abled, but rather a “type of her class,” a representative of industrial wage-laborers whose lives consist of a “waking stupor which smothered pain and hunger.”⁵³ Her economically based cognitive condition drives her to crime, when she steals money from the men visiting the ironworks factory, hoping to use it to leave the mill-town with Hugh and a younger character named Janie. Hugh, Deborah’s love interest, is blamed for the theft and thrown in jail, where he commits suicide. This novella presents an entirely new conception of what cognitive disability is: it is no longer a God-given (or parent-earned) unchangeable simplicity, but rather a suppression of the mental faculties caused by environmental factors, which leads to a life of “hopeless discomfort and veiled crime.”⁵⁴

Deborah’s “cure” is depicted at the very end of the book, beginning with the appearance of a benevolent Quaker woman, who removes her from the mill-town, taking her to a place without pollution, in the hills, with lots of sunlight. Within her “cure,” Deborah

⁵⁰ Rebecca Harding Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” in *Great Short Stories by American Women* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 3.

⁵¹ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 8.

⁵² Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 9, 4, 8.

⁵³ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 8.

⁵⁴ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 8.

adopts many of the stereotypical characteristics of female characters with cognitive disabilities that Hetty embodied: she becomes humble, soft-spoken, angelic, and deeply religious. Interestingly, her “cure” is most marked by her integration within the community. Davis repeatedly points out that Deborah is “much loved by these silent, restful people”⁵⁵; this treatment is the opposite of the treatment she faces in the mill-town, where she is somewhat of a loner, treated with a pity that doesn’t extend to friendship. The “cure” of Deborah’s cognitive disability is, then, dependent on being supported by and included in a community. Unlike Hetty and Ellee, Deborah’s cognitive disability is dynamic, environmentally caused, and allows for community integration and support.

However, this “cure” is not just a support narrative for institutions such as the New York Asylum for Idiots and the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feebleminded Youth, but is also a narrative which actively participates in larger progressive narratives of race, labor, and disease. Throughout the novella, Deborah’s “cure” is accompanied by metaphors of dark and light, of blackness and whiteness, in order to draw comparisons between slavery and industrial wage-labor (comparisons that were common by the 1860s within reform circles). Deborah’s cognitive disability is a tool within this comparison—just as Hetty’s “mind beneath the level of her race” is described by association with Native Americans, Deborah’s (and, therefore, that of all of “her type”) is described through associations with blackness. In his article “‘Discovering Some New Race’: Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron Mills’ and the Literary Emergence of Working-Class Whiteness,” Eric Schocket discusses the ways in which Davis employs racialized language to depict suppressed cognitive ability as associated with wage labor in the iron

⁵⁵ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 33.

industry. He argues that by employing words commonly associated with slaves and the black race,

Davis means to jar readers through an initial moment of misapprehension: instead of discovering black slaves, they find industrial laborers whose bodies mimic the physical determinism of chattel servitude by bearing similar marks of bondage and oppression.⁵⁶

Through her racialized depictions, Davis suggests that the standards of living endured by the iron workers have reduced their intellectual and physical capacities. In her initial description of the mill workers, she paints a picture of deadened potential:

Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night...laid by dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for body and soul...These men, going by with drunken faces, and brains full of unawakened power.⁵⁷

Here Davis is literally blackening the skin of the white workers by “[begriming it] with smoke and ashes.” By visually illustrating the ways in which industrial wage labor turns whiteness into blackness, Davis uses a racial comparison to describe the stifling of Deborah’s (and all of the mill-workers’) cognitive ability.

Not only does Davis use racial comparisons to depict the physical and intellectual suppression of the iron workers, but she speaks of cognitive disability in terms of disease as well, declaring the “terrible tragedy” of the lives of the mill workers to be “a symptom of the

⁵⁶Eric Schocket, “‘Discovering Some New Race’: Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron Mills’ and the Literary Emergence of Working-Class Whiteness,” *PMLA* 115, no. 1, Special Topic: Rereading Class (Jan., 2000), 47.

⁵⁷Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 3.

disease of their class...a reality of soul-starvation...a living death.”⁵⁸By combining the language of disease and of class, Davis (probably accidentally) implies an inherent connection between working-class people and cognitive disability. Within “Life in the Iron Mills” Davis combines descriptions of sickness and blackness in order to argue that the conditions created by industrial wage labor cause cognitive disability in white workers.

Davis extends the comparison between blackness and disability to one between whiteness and cure through landscape. The mill town is described initially as a place where the sky is “muddy,” the river “negro-like...slavishly bearing its burden,” the “air saturated with fog and grease and soot.” It is a town defined by its colors of brown and black and only described at night.⁵⁹ The movement of Deborah from the mill-town to the hills is marked by the first mention of the color white as “white fingers pass” over Hugh’s dead body. This first mention is followed by movement towards windows (and therefore light), relocation to “the hills [where]...the light lies warm...and the winds of God blow all the day,” and Deborah’s eventual cure, which comes about through “years of sunshine” during which she becomes “pure and meek...humble...loving.”⁶⁰ The sunlight, the coming of the dawn, is white in comparison to the blackness of Deborah’s former home and is marked through repeated descriptions of environmental purity. It is at the Quaker retreat where the “light is warmest, the air freest,” which allows the congregation to look to “hills higher and purer than these on which [they live].”⁶¹ Deborah’s emergence from the town, from blackness, from criminality, and from

⁵⁸ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 9.

⁵⁹ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 3.

⁶⁰ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 32, 33.

⁶¹ Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills,” 33.

cognitive disability is then an emergence into the light, into whiteness, into purity, into Godliness, and into ability which allows for self-support and community acceptance. Deborah is only able to become the female stereotype of cognitive disability after she has been cured, demonstrating the value of the cure itself.

Cure narratives driven by racial metaphor about the working poor like “Life in the Iron Mills” will become incredibly important to the American dialog about cognitive disability towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Indeed, Davis’s race-based cure narrative is an early shadow of what will become the American eugenics movement. In the 1890s, doctors and scientists picked up the combination of racialized and medicalized language as a tool to describe the poor in their attempt to prove that hereditary mental defect was proliferating in America’s poor and immigrant communities. The language which doctors and scientists will use to diagnose “feeble-mindedness” at the turn of the century is nearly exactly the same as that which Davis employs in “Life in the Iron Mills” to gain sympathy for the mill workers 40 years earlier. Dirtiness, of both the person and their home; a face which betrayed that “there was no mind there”; and “a father who made only a dollar a day” were all used as indicators of feeble-mindedness within the white community by psychologists and doctors.⁶²

However, there is a key difference between eugenic descriptions of the lower socio-economic classes and those in “Life in the Iron Mills”: the physical and mental oppression in “Life in the Iron Mills” is *caused* by poor living conditions and is curable through removal from

⁶² H.H. Goddard. *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919), 73.

them. While Davis is using racially charged language to describe the iron workers, she is not (purposefully) implying hereditary defect. Davis's work is a call for the elevation of mill workers above their current conditions, not an attempt to prove that the mill workers are naturally less capable than other human beings. Nevertheless, the eugenics movement will use the language of the anti-industrial movements to prove that the genetics of the poor (especially poor immigrants) were ripe with "feeble-mindedness," and that their socio-economic position is a direct result of their ability, not that their ability was compromised by their living conditions. The rhetoric that Davis uses to champion wage-laboring immigrants will be used as a tool to argue against the presence of immigrants and the poor in America. It will become the basis for immigration quota legislation, mass institutionalization, and forced sterilization of the American poor through the eugenics movement.

Chapter 3

Failed Cure Narratives and the Emergence of Eugenics, 1870-1895

The unified medical-social understanding of cognitive disability seen in the 1850s and early 1860s was short lived. The Séguin-based institutions for the feeble-minded were, for the most part, proven ineffective in rehabilitating those with cognitive disability labels by 1875. The failure of efforts to “cure” cognitive disability through institutionalization created a large, growing, and permanently dependent cognitively disabled population. As institutions began to fill to capacity, the public began to question whether mass, long-term, state-funded institutionalization was a feasible option for the “feeble-minded,” and many advocated a return to family- and community- based care systems. Through the 1870s and 80s, growing public skepticism about the viability of institutions developed into allegations of institutional abuse, repeated investigations, and a consequent withdrawal of state funding. Those in favor of institutions responded by saying that their populations would pose a danger to society and to themselves if integrated. Media sources reinforced both of these ideas through frequent coverage of the investigations and allegations levied at institutions alongside narratives of

abuse and criminal activity involving those with cognitive disability labels. Ideas about treatment of and care for those with cognitive disability were splintered once more.

This splintering began in the late 1860s and early 1870s when East Coast institutions for the rehabilitation of “idiots and the feeble-minded” finally admitted that “only a small percentage of their students could ever be completely self-supporting, and that alternate provisions [for their wards] would have to be made.”⁶³ Because of the impossibility of reintegrating their wards into the community, the “mean period of retention more than doubled” in the 1870s as compared to the 1860s and 50s. As rehabilitation institutions became more custodial, “the educational emphasis shifted from academic achievement to vocational training” in order for institutions to be able to “productively employ their inmates’ labor” for profit.⁶⁴ Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the institutions formerly lauded as humane and effective places to teach “idiots” and the “feeble-minded” were constantly being investigated for cruelty and neglect.

The *New York Times* published the proceedings of several of these investigations, all of which noted the number of individuals in the care of each institution as compared to their legal carrying capacity and the costs of the institutions to run. It is important to note that these investigations were part of a wider movement to regulate state-run asylums, poorhouses, almshouses, and orphanages as they reached carrying capacity. In 1875 the *New York Times*

⁶³Tylor, “Denied the Power to Choose the Good,” 476.

Here, it is important to note that the failure of Séguin-type schools happened over decades in the U.S. While East Coast schools faced skepticism beginning in the late 1860s, these schools were still being built across the country, especially in the Midwest, into the 1890s. However, the skepticism of institutionalization described here was a national phenomenon by the late 1890s.

⁶⁴ Tylor, “Denied the Power to Choose the Good,” 476.

published the complete proceedings from the New York state senate investigation of “How the Institutions are managed—penitentiary, hospital, and alms-house affairs—prison labor and pauper laziness,” which detailed the overpopulation and funding needs of institutions—as well as their inability to get their inmates to work productively. In 1876, the *New York Times* covered the expulsion of nearly all of the children on Randall Island, the site of the state school for “pauper and desolate children” as well as those with cognitive disability labels. Only the most severely disabled were allowed to remain at the institution. These investigations were not always published as impartially as in the *New York Times*. The *Indiana Sentinel* published abuse allegations so vivid against the nearby “Home for the Feeble-minded and Soldier’s Orphan Children” that a letter to the editor was later published in order to assert that beatings that occurred there were not “without mercy” and that the punishments that were administered were neither “too severe or unreasonable.” The 1880s and 90s brought coverage of fraud allegations against for-profit institutions as well as repeated coverage of deadly fires in both state and private institutions for the care of the cognitively disabled. Over the course of two decades, repeated newspaper coverage of investigations, abuse allegations, and unsafe conditions for the “feeble-minded” led to a general distrust of institutionalization as a solution for the care of those with cognitive disabilities.

Responses to these institutional failures were wide-ranging, but they generally fell into two camps: 1) abandon mass institutionalization in favor of community support; or 2) double down on institutionalization and provide better funding. To argue that institutionalization must continue, institutionalists insisted that if “[their wards] were denied proper care and supervision” they were at risk of “regression” and posed a “danger to [themselves] and to

society.”⁶⁵ These warnings were reinforced by frequent newspaper coverage of crimes committed against or by those labeled “feeble-minded.” These crimes were usually violent and described in great detail, painting the “feeble-minded” citizen as both a victim and an unpredictable criminal. These warnings of danger and regression in the mainstream media became the beginnings of eugenic rhetoric within cognitive disability circles.

Throughout the 1870s and 80s, eugenic dialog was beginning to take form. The first eugenic case study, *The Jukes*, written by Robert Dugdale, was published for the general public in 1875. *The Jukes* advanced the idea that poverty, criminal behavior, and cognitive disability were hereditarily linked traits; it did so in order to advocate for measures to halt “feeble-minded” procreation. Family-based case studies like *The Jukes* focused on the amount of taxpayer money that could have been saved had the original parents not had children.⁶⁶ These narratives began to reinvent institutionalist rhetoric; instead of focusing on rehabilitation, they focused on the need to separate those with cognitive disability labels from the general population to stop them from having children.

These arguments established an invisible, insidious, and unpredictable type of cognitive disability, one that did not announce itself through physical traits, in order to argue that integration of those with cognitive disability labels into the community would lead to their procreation. In 1896, the *New York Times* published an attack on then-presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in which several doctors attempted to diagnose him with

⁶⁵ Tylor, “Denied the Power to Choose the Good,” 476.

⁶⁶ Dugdale estimates that the Jukes family cost the state \$1,308,000, or 23,081,668.43 in today’s money.

“feeble-mindedness.” The article encapsulates the ways in which cognitive disability was being rebranded as insidious, threatening, and invisible:

An essential characteristic of degeneracy is that the individual afflicted bears in himself the germs which make him continuously more incapable of fulfilling his own functions in life. The indicators of degeneracy are characteristic of a... latent neuropathic disposition. The indices mentioned, such as feeble-mindedness, that is the stigmata, are vices of functional and organic evolution. The deformities... should be distinguished from such a deviation from the normal as this.

In this argument for Bryan’s unfitness for the presidency, consulted doctors outline an invisible and dangerous sort of degeneracy, one which is “latent,” and for which feeble-mindedness is not the diagnosis but only its “stigmata.” This context makes “feeble-mindedness” undetectable by any but the highly trained eye, a threat infiltrating even the highest office. Institutional arguments relied on portrayals of cognitive disability like this that formulated the diagnosis as difficult to detect and hereditarily dangerous.

On the other hand, advocates for community support often emphasized the cost of institutionalization and the possibilities for the cognitively disabled to make their way within the community by doing menial labor. The support for community care can be seen in the push for specialization in instruction for the cognitively disabled. In an article published in the *New York Times*, Dr. James Haney petitions for a new type of school which would cater to those “who are not so idiotic as to be sent to asylums, and yet who are too feeble-minded to be sent to the regular schools with reasonable hope of being educated.”⁶⁷ By splitting the “feeble-minded” population into categories based on perceived ability, advocates for

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1899.

community integration hoped to employ the higher-functioning in menial labor while keeping the “lower grades of defective children” in institutions.⁶⁸ This would, in theory, lower the rate of institutionalization while better preparing those for whom integration was a possibility for the workforce.

This theory, in contrast to that of the pre-eugenicist institutionalists, hinges on the idea that feeble-mindedness is easily physically recognizable. In the same article in which he advocates for vocational training for the cognitively disabled, Dr. Haney asserts that those with even mild forms of cognitive disability are quickly distinguishable through abnormalities “of the face and head” including “abnormalities of the jawbone, the hair lip, the split palate, or...thick, dome-like palates.”⁶⁹ More commonly, assertions that cognitive disability is easily recognizable relied on facial expressions. In 1891, the *Christian Recorder*, an African-American newspaper based in Philadelphia, asserted that “An idiot can manipulate the muscles of his face and nose so as to manufacture a sneer, but he couldn't look intelligent did he try ever so hard.”⁷⁰ Because the institutionalist arguments hinged on a fear of accidental “feeble-minded” reproduction because of an inability of the general public to recognize the condition, the arguments for integration had to assert that cognitive disability was recognizable by the untrained eye. If abled members of the community could recognize the cognitively disabled instinctually, then there was no reason to fear. This view, in opposition to the former, necessitates an easily detectable and non-threatening form of cognitive disability.

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1899.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1899.

⁷⁰ *Christian Recorder*, Feb. 5, 1891.

By the 1890s, both narratives play out in American fiction as they compete to become dominant. Probably the most famous cognitively disabled character created during this time period, Melville's Billy Budd, exemplifies the perfect case for institutionalization: he is handsome and unobtrusive, simple-minded without it being apparent, large, extremely strong, and unaware of his own strength.⁷¹ The tragedy of Billy Budd is that, even though he is pure and innocent, he is aggravated into accidentally killing an obviously villainous character and must therefore be executed. Melville's narrative manages not only to portray the need for institutionalization (that Billy is dangerous to those around him) but also unwittingly argues that institutionalization is better, not only for the abled, but for the disabled as well; if Billy had been institutionalized, he wouldn't have killed Claggart and would still be alive. Billy Budd's story is that of being unable to assimilate to neurotypical society and therefore being forcibly removed from it.

Melville portrays Billy's cognitive disability is portrayed as fairly minor throughout the story. Billy's "feeble-mindedness" is, like Hetty's before, described in biblical terms:

Billy Budd was a foundling...with little or no sharpness of faculty or any trace of wisdom of the serpent, nor yet quite a dove, he possessed that kind and degree of intelligence going along with the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge...of self-consciousness he seemed to have little or none, or about as much as we may reasonably impute to a dog of Saint Bernard's...Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company...there was just one thing amiss within him. No visible blemish indeed...but an occasional liability to a vocal defect. Though in the hour of elemental uproar or peril he was everything a sailor should be, yet under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if

⁷¹ Melville worked on "Billy Budd" between 1888 and 1891, at which point he died and left the story unfinished. It was published posthumously in 1924.

expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more of less of a stutter, or even worse.⁷²

Billy's disability seems, at first glance, to be a sort of God-given assurance of innocence and goodness. Billy's status as innocent and simple, having "little or no sharpness of faculty or any trace of wisdom of the serpent," is what causes him to become the "peacemaker" of the first ship that he works on; it is also what attracts the attentions of Claggart to him on the *Bellipotent*.⁷³ Billy's fundamental innocence, his goodness, and his angelic qualities later function to make his death sentence seem cruel and unjust.

Billy's innocence, then, must be protected from exposure to "the serpent"—to vice, to ill-will, and to immorality—in order for him to be safe from his own exaggerated reactions to the very qualities which he does not possess, having never been "proffered the apple of knowledge."⁷⁴ Billy's reactionary tendencies, his inability to control himself, are foreshadowed in Melville's initial description of him as well. When Melville compares Billy to a "dog of Saint Bernard's" and then later to an "upright barbarian," he hints at a lack of reasoning, to reactions driven by instinct rather than logic. These comparisons function similarly to those which defined the cognitive disability of Ellee, and which were particularly present in Paulding's descriptions of his attacks on Walter Avery. They are meant to emphasize a lack of control and a reliance on instinct within combative moments. These initial hints at animalistic characteristics are reinforced as Billy kills Claggart, his body acting of its own accord. As Billy attempts to speak to defend himself against Claggart's accusations of mutiny, "the intent head

⁷² Herman Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor" in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 9-11.

⁷³ Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor," 5.

⁷⁴ Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor," 9.

and entire form strain[ed] forward in an agony of ineffectual eagerness to obey the injunction to speak” before the “right arm shot out and Claggart dropped to the deck.”⁷⁵ In this moment, Billy’s body is separate from his mind, disobeying its commands and acting on its own. Billy’s cognitively disabled body is, therefore, monstrous, betraying him in the moment when he needs its assistance most in order to defend himself against Claggart’s false charges of mutiny. During this moment, the only communication Billy can manage is a “strange, dumb gesturing and gurgling” as his surprise and horror at Claggart’s betrayal “serve to bring out his lurking defect.”⁷⁶ Even though the reader understands that Billy doesn’t mean to kill Claggart, that his moment of rage is exacerbated by his physical strength, Billy is still guilty in the eyes of the law and therefore must be put to death. Upon a closer look at the passage describing Billy’s cognitive disability, a warning about this type of behavior is also obvious—Billy’s disability appears or worsens in times of stress or “strong heart-feeling,” making him unable to cope with actions outside of what he understands. Billy’s innocence, his purity, is then also the cause of his death; because he is unable to understand sin, he responds to it inappropriately. His “lurking defect” surfaces at moments when he is confronted by the unfamiliar and causes him to react with animalistic instinct rather than human communication.

The combination of Billy’s “organic hesitancy” and physical characteristics is the source of his problems, not only in that the combination of the two causes him to underestimate his strength and kill Claggart, but also in that they cause Claggart’s enmity in the first place. Because of his “significant personal beauty,” Billy attracts attention and jealousy from the

⁷⁵ Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” 49-50.

⁷⁶ Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” 49.

“pallid” Claggart with the poorly molded chin;⁷⁷ because of his simplicity and goodness, Billy draws ire from a man “born with... a depravity according to nature.”⁷⁸ Billy’s seeming perfection, then, his beauty and goodness, create ill will towards him from those lacking the same qualities. Billy’s “vocal defect” then gives his antagonizers a way to tease him.⁷⁹ Billy’s near normalcy, his ability to almost blend in is, then, exactly what causes others to attack him. Even though he is high-functioning enough to support himself economically, integration into the community is unsafe for Billy Budd. Billy’s integration is also decidedly unsafe for those around him. Though he rarely gets mad—having a saint-like patience and a tendency to overlook cruelty on the part of others—his anger has disastrous consequences. A punch from Billy, an action which from anyone else would merit nothing but a black eye, kills the victim immediately. Billy is, then, uncontrollable when exposed to the injustice of an unfiltered world; it would have been better if he had been separated from mainstream society so he could have been sheltered. Billy exemplifies the perfect argument for the institutionalization of all those with cognitive disability labels, even those who can support themselves economically, for their own protection from a world which they cannot understand and which does not understand them.

In the past, critics of “Billy Budd” have focused closely on Captain Vere’s moral dilemma: whether or not to have Billy executed. Scholars have been arguing about Vere since the 1950s, deciding whether his actions are moral, and whether there is any plausible way for him to save

⁷⁷ Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” 31.

⁷⁸ Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” 30.

⁷⁹ Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” 11.

Billy.⁸⁰ These conversations are ultimately unproductive because Billy's death by execution is both mandated by the situation in which he puts himself (murdering a superior in front of another superior while the ship is on the brink of mutiny) and by his status as a Christ figure (an innocent, with a face which expresses a "crucifixion," termed "the angel [who] must hang" by Captain Vere).⁸¹ Billy must die, and Captain Vere must order him to die. While Captain Vere's moral dilemma is discussed at length during the book, its importance is secondary to Billy's narrative of disability, which has been generally disregarded in scholarly work. Billy's position as Christ figure, as innocent, and as angel creates in his execution a tragedy, but an unavoidable one. It is unavoidable because Billy's innocence cannot be sheltered in his community, because he will inevitably be confronted by evil actions he cannot understand, and, inevitably, he will react to them inappropriately. Billy, even with his high level of competency, cannot be integrated with the public, lest the "lurking defect" announce itself. He could only survive if he were permanently separated into an institution.

A counterpoint to Melville's "Billy Budd, Sailor" is Mary Wilkins Freeman's short story "Knitting Susan." In the story, Susan, an orphan with obvious cognitive disabilities is taken in by Mrs. White, to whom she proves immensely valuable. At the beginning of the story, Freeman describes Susan as a perpetual wanderer "unable to gain footing in an almshouse; tossed like a worthless thing from one village to another...her claim to charity disputed."⁸² However, she becomes seamlessly integrated into to the community by the end of the story, acting as a sort

⁸⁰ Recent examples include "Rainbows, Fogs, and Other Smokescreens: Billy Budd and the Questions of Ethics" by Thomas Claviez or "Melville's Motley Crew: History and Constituent Power in 'Billy Budd'" by David Drysdale.

⁸¹ Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor," 50, 51.

⁸² Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Knitting Susan" in *Fifty-Two Stories of Girl-Life at Home and Abroad*, (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1894), 2.

of babysitter to the town children and eventually sacrificing herself to an icy death in the lake in order to save a neighborhood child.⁸³ Susan is, in nearly every way, the opposite of Billy. To begin with, her disability has obvious physical markings: she has “hands badly burnt,” indicating an inability to do physical labor, “blue eyes vacant,” and a “fair, weak head” (1-2).⁸⁴ She is also, unlike Billy Budd, outwardly cognitively disabled, unable, at the beginning of the story, to say anything but “I can knit” (1).⁸⁵ Throughout the story, she is completely dependent on the action of knitting to be able to answer questions or focus on a conversation: during the action of knitting “her blue eyes became steadier, and her whole expression more concentrated.”⁸⁶ Her “simple-mindedness” is constantly marked and obvious to all those around her. Like Billy, her vocalizations are a mark of her disability as well, but rather than simply having a stutter, her communication is nearly all in half-formed sentences or animal-like exclamations, her voice described as “rude” and “untrained.”⁸⁷ She does not have many of Billy’s more attractive qualities; she is not innocent or religious, she is physically deformed and pitiable, and she lacks the ability to communicate with those around her. Susan’s “feeble-mindedness” is, unlike Billy’s, an unattractive and, at first glance, burdensome disability. However, she proves her worth, both emotional and economic, throughout the short story.

Susan’s knitting is initially portrayed as a useless and unemployable skill; after all, the majority of nineteenth century women can knit. However, Susan ends up paying her keep and then some through this single skill. Because of Mrs. White’s arthritis, Susan’s ability to knit

⁸³ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 2.

⁸⁴ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 1-2.

⁸⁵ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 1.

⁸⁶ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 3.

⁸⁷ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 5.

relieves Mrs. White of one of her most painful day-to-day tasks. Mrs. White goes so far as to claim that “no one knew what a relief to her was that knitting girl in the corner.”⁸⁸ Throughout the story, Susan begins knitting for the entire town, hiring out her services at a low rate, and is eventually able to “pay well for her keep, since she not alone wholly supplied the whole White family with stockings, but earned many a shilling by knitting for other people.”⁸⁹ Susan not only contributes economically to the White family and the community, but she contributes emotionally as well. She becomes a surrogate daughter to Mrs. White, whose own daughter died in childbirth, and she is “quite a favorite” of the schoolchildren.⁹⁰ Through her single, simple, seemingly useless skill, Susan is able to provide for herself and create a place for herself within both a family and a community that she was not born into and that does not seem to have any responsibility for her. Her participation in the community, then, is a mutually beneficial economic and social relationship, not mere charity.

Like Billy Budd, Susan dies at the end of her story; unlike Billy Budd, Susan chooses her own death. After the ice breaks while she is entertaining a group of neighborhood children on thawing Mattapog pond, Susan gives up her own chance at survival to save all of the children by remaining on the ice floe in order to throw the children across the water onto land. She dies, not because she can't fit in or function within a society, but precisely because she can, because she loves the children. In her sacrifice, Susan cements her place within the community as an adult, a protector of the children. She has a purpose and a place, and the town mourns her when she dies. Though her cognitive disabilities are much more debilitating than Billy Budd's,

⁸⁸ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 3.

⁸⁹ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 4.

⁹⁰ Freeman, “Knitting Susan,” 3.

they do not stop her from integrating into a community, from living a meaningful life outside of an institution. She does not need to be protected, but merely to be allowed to use her only ability to provide for herself. Through “Knitting Susan,” Freeman presents the reader with a picture of sustainable community integration even for those who have more severe forms of cognitive disability. This creates a situation in which institutionalization is unnecessary for the majority of those labeled with cognitive disabilities, in which the typically abled will discover great worth in those with cognitive disabilities if they only give them an opportunity to become part of their community.

“Billy Budd, Sailor” and “Knitting Susan” clearly present competing pictures of cognitive disability which align with pro- and anti-institutionalist arguments. Those in favor of institutionalization used narratives like “Billy Budd” (though, not “Billy Budd” itself since it had yet to be published) to illustrate why even those who seem competent and harmless must be separated from the community; those in favor of community based support could use anecdotes similar to “Knitting Susan” to prove that integration was possible even for those without advanced skills. Importantly, this split was no longer along social and medical lines, but within the medical community itself as it struggled to find ways forward after the failed experimental institutions of the 1860s. By the time these stories were written in the late 1880s and 90s, however, the push for complete segregation through institutionalization was already winning out, close to becoming the full-fledged American eugenics movement.

Chapter 4

Narratives of Eugenic Institutionalization, 1910-1920

By 1915, the eugenic rhetoric occupied an undeniable place in the national political and scientific dialog of cognitive disability. Since the publication of *The Jukes* in 1877, many more eugenic case studies were published for public consumption, including *The Hill Folk* (1912), *The Nam Family* (1912), and *The Kallikak Family* (1912). Scientists, doctors, social reformers pushed eugenic ideals in the arena of national and state public policy and within the public eye, using them to justify legislation promoting the non-voluntary institutionalization of those with cognitive disability labels; non-consensual sterilization of those in institutions, asylums, and prisons; and strict immigration quotas targeting “non-desirable” populations. Major literary figures, both black and white, supported eugenics as well: W.E.B. DuBois’s idea of the talented tenth was eugenic in nature; Pauline Hopkins was a major and vocal advocate as was George S. Schuyler; Jack London went so far as to state “I believe that the future human world belongs to eugenics, and will be determined by eugenics.”⁹¹ With the realization of the American eugenics

⁹¹ Ewa Barbara Luczak, *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Heredity Rules in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 11.

movement, race, always present in metaphor and comparison, had come to the forefront of the conversation surrounding cognitive disability. In a particularly incendiary passage from his 1921 work *The Trend of the Race*, Samuel Holmes, a prominent California-based doctor, proclaimed that “the biological situation of our [white] race is at present in many respects unique...everywhere the nemesis of degeneracy hangs threateningly over the organic world.”⁹² Charles Davenport, a professor at University of Chicago, declared that “[defective traits] are probably derived from our ape-like ancestors in which they were normal traits.”⁹³ Within the eugenic narrative, the white race was literally regressing because of the procreation of those eugenicists labeled “feeble-minded.” In order to stem the progress of the “degeneration,” eugenicists in the 1890s looked to mass institutionalization as a way to stop the reproduction of those they believed “unfit.”

However, eugenicists still struggled with the costs of institutionalizing such a (theoretically) large population of the “feeble-minded.” In 1892, W.W. Godding attempted to outline a plan for an institution which would pay for itself through inmate labor in the speech “Recognition of the Classes of the Insane in Asylum Construction.” In his speech, given at the Social Welfare Forum’s Twelfth Annual Conference of Charities, he lays out only two fundamental necessities of the institution: that “it must be fireproof and provide for the

⁹² Samuel J. Holmes, *The Trend of the Race; a Study of Present Tendencies in the Biological Development of Civilized Mankind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921). 4-5.

⁹³ Charles Davenport, “The Inheritance of Physical and Mental Traits of Man and their Application to Eugenics,” in *Heredity and Eugenics; a Course of Lectures Summarizing Recent Advances in Knowledge in Variation, Heredity, and Evolution and Its Relation to Plant, Animal and Human Improvement and Welfare*. Ed. Castle, William E., John Merle Coulter, Charles Benedict Davenport, Edward M. East, and William Lawrence Tower (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1913), 286.

distinction of sex.”⁹⁴ While there was a boom in the institutionalized population, eugenic reformers were still searching for cheaper options for restricting the reproduction of those they labeled unfit. Throughout the 1890s, scientists and doctors researched sterilization as a potential way to curb “unfit” reproduction at a fraction of the cost of institutionalization (resulting in the development of the modern vasectomy). The first law resulting in the non-consensual sterilization of the “feeble-minded” was passed in 1907 in Indiana; nearly 30 such state laws followed over the proceeding decades. Sterilization, though cheap, was, unsurprisingly, much more controversial than institutionalization, especially within religious communities. The institutionalization versus sterilization debate features prominently in much of the medical and popular literature of the period.

In order to define and target populations for institutionalization and sterilization, eugenicists split Caucasian ethnicities into “higher” and “lower” categories of whiteness, a hierarchy in which the presence of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe (“lower” whites) threatened the bloodlines of the “higher” whites who had immigrated earlier (those from northern and western Europe, with the exception of the Irish). In a study on Ellis Island between 1910 and 1912, leading eugenicists H.H. Goddard concluded that 87 percent of Russian immigrants and nearly 83 percent of Jewish immigrants were feeble-minded. Speculative diagnoses of Hungarian and Italian populations were almost as high.⁹⁵ Within

⁹⁴W.W. Godding, “The Recognition of Classes of the Insane in Asylum Construction,” *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections at the Twelfth Annual Session in Washington D.C., June 4-10, 1885*, ed. Isabel C. Barrows (Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1885), 107.

Although he really only seems concerned about men’s internment, quipping at the end of the speech that “when the woman physician comes to the front, she can tell us what to do with [female inmates]” (112).

⁹⁵ Roxana Galusca, “From Fictive Ability to National Identity: Disability, Medical Inspection, and Public Health Regulations on Ellis Island,” *Cultural Critique* no 72 (Spring, 2009), 157.

populations which they considered to be at high-risk for cognitive disability, eugenicists argued that these populations were reproducing much faster than “desirable” populations, providing a mechanism for the regression of the white race which they believed in. The split of the white race into “higher” and “lower,” the “lower” containing incredibly inflated numbers of



First poster reads: “This light flashes every 16 second. Every 16 seconds a person is born in the United States.”

Second poster reads: “this light flashes every 7 ½ minutes. Every 7 ½ minutes a high grade person is born in the United States who will have ability to do creative work and be fit for leadership. About 4% of all Americans come within this class.

This was a display at a Fitter Family Contest circa 1926.

Rich Remsburg, “Found in the Archives: America’s Unsettling Early Eugenics Movement,” *NPR*, June 1, 2011, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2011/06/01/136849387/found-in-the-archives-americas-unsettling-early-eugenics-movement>

“feeble-minded” individuals, transformed the dialogue of cognitive disability. Instead of isolated cases of obvious nature, the dominant narrative was one which emphasized the sheer number of the feeble-minded and their ability to blend in.

This narrative is that of Billy Budd, not that of Knitting Susan (or even of Hetty or Deborah). It was a narrative in which anyone you meet could be cognitively disabled and you might never realize it. It is also a narrative in which the worst possible outcome for you and the country as a whole is reproduction with a “feeble-minded” individual. In his work of eugenic propaganda, *The Trend of the Race*, Samuel Holmes declares that “The distinction between an

ignorant person who has normal mental ability and a high grade feeble-minded one is often...impossible.”⁹⁶ In his 1912 case study *The Kallikak Family*, Goddard describes “feeble-mindedness” to be almost impossible to discern from the lay perspective, though “a glance sufficed to establish [mentality]” by the trained eye.”⁹⁷ Between 1890 and 1915, cognitive disability is cemented as a “lurking defect,” nearly undetectable, silently reversing the evolution of the white race.

The conception of cognitive disability as a slippery, insidious threat, unrecognizable by the untrained eye, is epitomized in Jack London’s 1914 short story “Told on the Drooling Ward.” It is the first narrative of cognitive disability we’ve come across that is told from the perspective of the labeled person, and, as such, it uses the narrative voice to express the liminal space of the high-functioning cognitively disabled individual within both the institution and society at large. This perspective creates an entirely new sort of cognitively disabled character, one who is not identified by animal comparisons, religiosity, innocence, or monstrosity ascribed by third-person narration, but is rather the owner of a voice describing himself. London’s first-person narrative produces a new viewpoint from which to observe the cognitively disabled in literature, expanding typical modes of representation. Tom, the narrator, is allowed to define his own disability, and, in doing so, questions the legitimacy of his diagnosis. However, this questioning also defines Tom as an unreliable narrator, and, in many ways, as a threat: if Tom does not accept the label of “feeble-minded,” then he does not recognize himself as “defective” and is therefore likely to pose a eugenic risk. The story begins with a claim of typicality from

⁹⁶ Holmes, *The Trend of the Race*, 33.

⁹⁷ Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, 78.

Tom: "Me? I'm not a drooler. I'm the assistant."⁹⁸ As the story progresses, it becomes evident that "droolers" are the "lowest grade" of the feebleminded, those whom Tom helps care for within the institution. Tom also separates himself from the "micro[s]," the "hydros," and the "low-grade" and "high-grade" "epilecs" (epileptics).⁹⁹ Interestingly, Tom also rejects comparisons between himself and the "high-grade [feebleminded] girls," assumedly the category he himself would fit into, asserting that "they're real feebs, ain't they?...I'm not that kind of a feeb, thank God. Sometimes I don't think I'm a feeb at all."¹⁰⁰ Tom's perception of himself posits him as a liminal character, one who is not *actually* cognitively disabled but who has been labeled by doctors and therefore exists within that world. Tom's separation of himself from the other occupants of the institution is particularly interesting when considering the genetic theory of the time, which posited that "Epilepsy and feeblemindedness may replace each other, as equivalents, in pedigrees."¹⁰¹ In other words, epilepsy and feeblemindedness, as well as criminality, pauperism, prostitution, heart disease, and a number of other conditions, were not scientifically distinct, but were rather different manifestations of the same defect of the "germ-plasm" (the theorized genetic material of the time). Tom's separation of himself from these populations, is, in a historical sense, entirely imaginary. While Tom makes distinctions between himself and other "grades" of disability, contemporary scientists and doctors would have viewed him as simply one of many possible manifestations of the same defect.

⁹⁸ Jack London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," in *Jack London, Novels and Stories* ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Library of America, 1982), 945.

⁹⁹ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 946-7.

¹⁰⁰ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 946.

¹⁰¹ Davenport, "Inheritance of the Physical and Mental Traits of Man and their Application to Eugenics," 282.

Tom's self-separation from the other patients at the institution signals that he is a eugenically threatening character, that he is able to "pass" as "normal" if he so wishes. However, Tom also understands how to use his "feebleminded" label to his advantage, claiming that "when I don't want to know, or when they want me to do something don't want to do, I just let my mouth lop down and laugh and make foolish noises."¹⁰² He claims that "you can tell a feeb anywhere by looking at his mouth and teeth. But that doesn't prove I'm a feeb. It's just lucky that I look like one."¹⁰³ Tom systematically acts out a cognitive disability more severe than his own in order to get what he wants. For example, when Tom wants to leave the home of the Bopps, his adoptive parents, because they're abusing him, he "got slower, and made more foolish noises" to try to convince them to send him back to the home. When they won't, he steals money the Bopps give him to run errands every morning and buys a train ticket back to the institution. Tom's balance on the line of cognitive disability finally fulfills eugenic fears when he states that he wants to "get [Doctor Dalrymple] to give me a declaration that I ain't a feeb... and then I'll marry Miss Jones and live right on [at the institution]. And if she won't have me, I'll marry Miss Kelsey or some other nurse."¹⁰⁴ While Tom's ambiguity about his cognitive disability is initially fairly harmless, his goal of marrying and, assumedly, having children, goes against eugenic ideals. In *The Trend of the Race*, Doctor Samuel Holmes asserted that "Matings of normal and defective simply sow the seeds for future trouble...Nothing could be more inconsistent with everything we know of heredity than the ill-considered advice that strength may mate with weakness."¹⁰⁵ Tom being allowed to marry a nurse would be exactly such a

¹⁰² London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 947.

¹⁰³ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 947.

¹⁰⁴ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 950.

¹⁰⁵ Holmes, *The Trend of the Race*, 61.

pairing. Tom's perception of his own liminality, his own understanding of his ability as in-between that of the normally abled and the cognitively disabled, makes him a threatening figure within a eugenic context.

Tom seems comfortable with, and even creates, his own liminal place within the institution, working as an unpaid assistant in the "drooling ward" and claiming that "they can't get along without [him] in this institution."¹⁰⁶ At the points in the story where Tom leaves the institution, first to be adopted by the Bopps and then to run away with the "high-grade epilecs" Joe and Charley, he ends up returning to the institution voluntarily, stating "I'm Tom. I belong here."¹⁰⁷ Though he daydreams about life outside of the institution, particularly about getting married, he doesn't seem to make any real effort towards his goal of independence. Tom also gives us evidence of his own inability to survive outside of the institution when he tries to run away with Joe and Charley and they forget food because they "never thought of being hungry."¹⁰⁸ Notwithstanding Tom's repeated claims that he could survive outside of the institution, his actions give evidence to the opposite. While Tom is able to leave the institution of his own volition, he always ends up coming back because he lacks the knowledge to care for himself. With this information, the reader understands more about the nature of the institution itself—it is purely custodial, taking care of the inmates for their entire lives with no goal of self-support or community integration. This institution is seemingly unconcerned with sterilization; rather, it plans to look after its cognitively disabled patients for their entire lives.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 946.

¹⁰⁷ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 950.

¹⁰⁸ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 953.

¹⁰⁹ An interesting omission given that the institution in "Told in the Drooling Ward" is based off of the California Home for the Care and Training of the Feeble-minded (now the Sonoma Developmental Center) which sterilized over

London's writing of a purely custodial institution is, especially in California at this time, a political act. By 1920, the state of California had enacted 2,558 forced sterilizations based on a law passed in 1909; in comparison, the state of Indiana, which passed the first eugenic sterilization law in 1907, had sterilized fewer than 250 people. "Told in the Drooling Ward" is a story aware of its own place within the eugenic conversation. London even goes so far as to comment several times on the place of politics in the care of those with cognitive disabilities. In the second paragraph of the story, Tom tells us that "[the institution] belongs to the State of California and is run by politics."¹¹⁰ He later adds to this claim by stating

Only yesterday, Doctor Dalrymple said to me, "Tom," he said, "just don't know what I'd do without you." And he ought to know, seeing as he's had the bossing of a thousand feeb for going on two years. Dr. Whatcomb was before him. They get appointed you know. It's politics. I've seen a whole lot of doctors here in my time. I was here before any of them. I've been in this institution twenty-five years. No, I've got no complaints. The institution couldn't be run better. It's a snap to be a high-grade feeb. Just look at Doctor Dalrymple. He has troubles. He holds his job by politics. You bet we high-grade feeb talk politics. We know all about it, and it's bad. An institution like this oughtn't to be run by politics. Look at Doctor Dalrymple. He's been here two years and learned a lot. Then politics will come along and throw him out and send a new director who won't know anything about feeb.¹¹¹

Tom's knowledge of politics in this paragraph is obviously derived from overhearing conversations between the institution's staff. His detailed understanding implies that these conversations are common enough for him to be able to reproduce them. London's anti-political stance suggests that the care of those with cognitive disability labels should be left to

5,000 cognitively disabled individuals between 1920 and 1950. The property bordered London's private ranch and London submitted the manuscript to the director of the center before publication.

¹¹⁰ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 945.

¹¹¹ London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 947-948.

doctors and physicians, taken out of the public arena and dealt with by the medical community alone. London's story comes at a time when state courts were severely limiting the power of institutions to treat their patients as they would like. While some states had passed laws allowing non-consensual sterilization, many of these laws went through court battles and some were even struck down. London's descriptions of the instability that political involvement brings to the institution critiques the role of politicians in the welfare of the cognitively disabled. Only the medical community is able to properly care for Tom and which provides his life with purpose. This is particularly evident when Tom's experiences at the institution are compared with those at the Bopps' farm. Though Tom is working in both instances, he takes pride in his work at the institution, in being able to feed the "droolers" competently, seeing it as his responsibility and, in some ways, his life work. When he aims to leave the institution with Charley and Joe, he cannot leave this portion of his life behind which is why he brings the "drooler" Little Albert with him on his escape attempt. In comparison, his work on the farm is uninspiring, prompting him to claim that

The ranch was no place for me...I had to get up at four o'clock and feed the horses, and milk cows, and carry the milk to the neighbors. They called it chores, but it kept me going all day... I never had any fun. I hadn't no time...I'd sooner feed mush and milk to feeb than milk cows with the frost on the ground.¹¹²

While Tom has the ability to work productively in both circumstances, he is obviously meant to be in the institution, rather than in the community. It is also within the institution that Tom's marital aspirations are put in check, when he tells Doctor Whatcomb that he would like to get married and Doctor Whatcomb responds by saying "he was very sorry, because feeb ain't

¹¹² London, "Told in the Drooling Ward," 948-949.

allowed to get married.”¹¹³ Not only is the institution the place where Tom is valued and happy, it is also the site which disallows him from marrying and reproducing, which, it seems, he would certainly do if he were not institutionalized. In this, London illustrates the eugenic necessity of institutionalization while simultaneously pointing out that its defects (high turnover rates, poor leadership, abuse, etc.) are the consequence of political control in a medical setting. “Told in the Drooling Ward,” then, creates a picture in which a “eugenic threat” (Tom) is contained to the benefit of both Tom and society, and in which Tom is conveniently able to work for his keep. It is an idealized picture of institutionalization in which the system works nearly perfectly, in which the “high-grade feebs” support the “low-grade feebs,” lowering costs while maintaining eugenic segregation and providing purpose for the inmates themselves.

¹¹³ London, “Told in the Drooling Ward,” 948.

Chapter 5

Narratives of Eugenic Sterilization and Euthanasia, 1915-1925

Throughout the 1910s and into the 1920s, eugenic ideals and reform dominated the discourse surrounding cognitive disability. The debate about the feasibility and ethics of reproductive isolation of individuals labeled feebleminded through institutionalization versus sterilization continued, with sterilization steadily gaining ground throughout the 1920s. By 1930, 27 of the 32 states that would pass involuntary sterilization laws had done so. The majority of these laws applied to mentally ill and “mentally deficient” populations, often determined based on nationality or race, while a small number of them also allowed sterilization for punitive purposes. Until 1927, the legality of compulsory sterilization laws was unclear, as state supreme courts and federal circuit courts had overturned many such laws up until this point. However, in 1927 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Virginia’s sterilization law in the case *Buck v. Bell*, effectively ending judicial resistance to such laws. Much of this resistance was due to the proposed use of castration as a method of sterilization but died down

as vasectomy was developed as a safer alternative. By 1935, 21,539¹¹⁴ non-consensual sterilizations had taken place in the U.S., nearly half of which occurred in California under state laws allowing the sterilization of those labeled with mental illness and cognitive disabilities within institutions and prisons.

While opposition to male sterilization by castration caused several courts to strike down involuntary sterilization laws before 1927, the safety of female patients does not seem to have been as much of an issue for the courts. Dangerous and invasive hysterectomies were commonly used to perform female sterilization, which comprised 61% of all sterilizations performed in the U.S. under compulsory sterilization laws. The higher rates of sterilization of women as opposed to men was symptomatic of the eugenic view of blame in procreation. American eugenic tradition very often placed the blame for dysgenic (eugenically unfit) procreation on the women. Eugenic advocates emphasized the sexual promiscuity and fertility of feeble-minded women as the source of the high rates of feeble-minded reproduction.

The trope of the “toxic female” is ubiquitous within eugenic literature. The toxic female was the original feeble-minded ancestor who infected the family line, and her “extreme fecundity” and sexual promiscuity became the markers of female feeble-mindedness.¹¹⁵ It was common belief that “The feeble-minded are notoriously prolific in reproduction,”¹¹⁶ but women were specifically targeted as the driving force behind this reproduction: “The high-grade

¹¹⁴ This does not include unlawful sterilizations, many of which occurred in East Coast states prior to legalization. For more information, see <https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/>.

¹¹⁵ Philip Reilly, *The Surgical Solution : A History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 22.

¹¹⁶ Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Eugenics Pub. Co, 1923). 41.

moron¹¹⁷ female group is the most dangerous class. They are not capable of becoming desirable or safe members of the community...they are certain to become sexual offenders and...to give birth to degenerate children."¹¹⁸ Sexual activity outside of wedlock was seen as a symptom of feeble-mindedness only in women, so developmental disability in children produced in such situations was almost always blamed on the mother. In addition to carrying the blame for reproduction, feeble-minded women were also considered highly likely to be the victims of sexual molestation or coercion and were often described as helpless or weak. Advocates for institutionalization often emphasized the victim-status of diagnosed women in order to sexually segregate them, not only as a method of stopping reproduction but also as a safety precaution for female patients.¹¹⁹ The combination of these two eugenic tropes created a duality within the feeble-minded female: not only was she extremely fertile and sexually promiscuous, but she was also defenseless against male predators.

Eugenicists pushed view of the "feeble-minded" woman as both aggressor and victim primarily in eugenic case studies. These studies were the descendants of *The Jukes*, written in the same style but tailored for a lay, rather than scientific, audience, and were crucial in the formation of the popular perception of cognitive disability during the American eugenics movement. The most read of these case studies was *The Kallikak Family*, written by prominent eugenicist H.H. Goddard in 1912. *The Kallikak Family* illuminates not only the contemporary

¹¹⁷ As the eugenics movement developed, the "feeble-minded" were split into three different classes: idiots, imbeciles, and morons. Idiots were said to have an IQ between 0 and 25, imbeciles between 26 and 50, and morons between 51 and 70. It was the "moron" population targeted by eugenicists as a "silent threat." H.H. Goddard defined the diagnosis in 1910 and expanded upon it in a 1927 article for *The Scientific Monthly* entitled "Who is a Moron?"

¹¹⁸ Anna Stubblefield, "'Beyond the Pale': Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization," *Hypatia* 22, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 162–81. 177.

¹¹⁹ Reilly, *The Surgical Solution*, 48.

scientific thought concerning the genetic heritability of feeble-mindedness, but also champions genetic links between developmental disability and conditions such as tuberculosis, epilepsy, alcoholism, criminality, heart disease, diphtheria, sexual immorality, and mental illness. In addition, *The Kallikak Family* emphasizes the idea that the individual conditions are linked hereditarily in the “germ-plasm,” what we today recognize as DNA. Scientists believed that the germ-plasm passed from parent to child with no changes or deletions; therefore, if a trait existed in the mother it was also present in the germ-plasm of the child, no matter what. Environmental factors merely caused specific traits in the germ-plasm to manifest at different times. This process meant that while some individuals in an affected family might appear unaffected, they possessed the ability to pass the family condition on to their offspring.

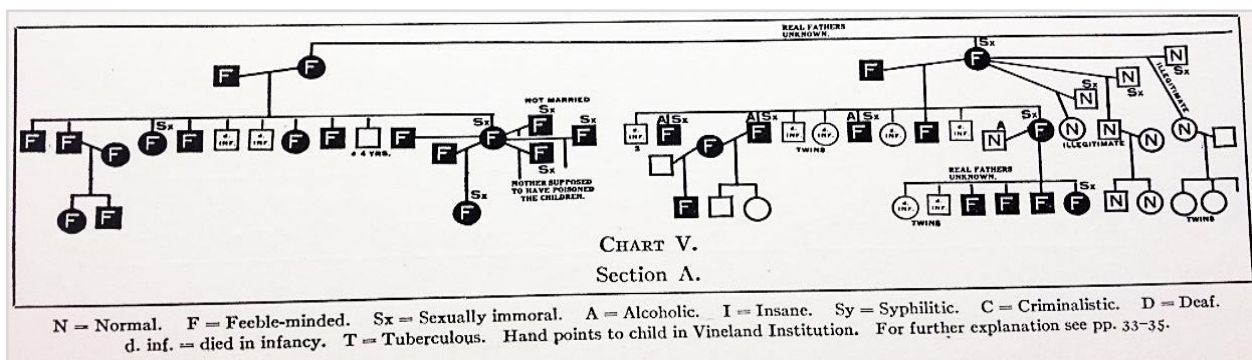
The Kallikaks¹²⁰ were a white family living in Piney Woods, New Jersey, whose bad germ-plasm Goddard “proves” by tracing it through multiple family trees. Goddard marked each individual on the tree with either “N” or “F,” meaning “normal” or “feeble-minded,” and included additional notes on members such as “low grade,” “[lives] in slums,” “epileptic,” “sexually immoral,” “alcoholic,” “insane,” “depressed/suicidal,” “stole a horse,” “does not appear normal,” and “hard to manage in school.”¹²¹ These additional markers denoted either conditions that Goddard believed might be inherited along with feeble-mindedness or behaviors which serve to illustrate the multi-faceted nature of the condition. He proves his claim through the reconstruction of a dysgenic family line, tracing back ancestrally from one feeble-minded girl whom he calls Deborah.¹²²

¹²⁰A pseudonym used by Goddard

¹²¹ Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, 38-39.

¹²² Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, 1.

Goddard traces Deborah's ancestry back to her great-grandfather whom he asserts had a child out of wedlock with a so-called feebleminded woman before having other children with his "normal" wife. By comparing the bloodlines created by the two mothers, Goddard concludes that "normal" individuals (coming from a family without a compromised gene pool) cannot produce feebleminded offspring, while feebleminded people will have feebleminded offspring about 75% of the time, depending on the cognitive state of their partner.¹²³ By beginning the lineage in this way, Goddard locates the degenerative force in the mother, not the father. Interestingly, *The Kallikak Family* also locates eugenic reform and action within women as well. He relies heavily on his "case worker," Elizabeth, S. Kite, a woman he paid to map Deborah's family tree through interviews with members of her family, neighbors, and friends. Goddard asserts that women are especially well suited for this type of work because they inspire a form of trust which men don't, making the subjects more likely to provide helpful information. Women were in every way at the forefront of eugenic reform, as subjects, medical professionals, caretakers, and activists.



One of many family trees from *The Kallikak Family*. Each member of the family is marked "F" or "N" for "Feebleminded" or "Normal." Additional letters indicate sexual immorality, insanity, alcoholism, and tuberculosis. Other markers next to individuals read "mother supposed to have poisoned children," or "not married."

Image from H.H. Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, 41.

¹²³ Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, 6.

The Kallikak Family forms a vivid, detailed picture of a racial threat: a subgroup of whites whose genetics predispose them to every form of physical and cognitive malady, whose women are both especially dangerous and vulnerable, and who are visually indistinguishable from other white people. The case study of the Kallikak family illustrates how “toxic” female members of this group were thought to be to an otherwise pure bloodline. In this view, the feeble-minded woman will create hundreds of “degenerate” descendants who will drain society of resources and further contaminate the race. Goddard’s Kallikaks formed the prototypical feeble-minded family which eugenics programs targeted. Riddled with disease, alcoholism, disability, poverty, crime, and promiscuity, the Kallikaks and others like them were the scapegoat for “many of our social difficulties” and their elimination was “the way out.”¹²⁴

Mary Wilkins Freeman’s short story “Old Woman Magoun,” published in 1925 strikingly portrays this narrative of the female with cognitive disability labels as both defenseless and highly sexualized. The story centers around Old Woman Magoun’s relationship with her feeble-minded granddaughter, Lily, the daughter of Magoun’s daughter and a man named Nelson Barry who is described as “the fairly dangerous degenerate of a good old family” who has a “sister of feeble intellect.”¹²⁵ The narrative begins with Magoun sending Lily, a 14-year-old who looks “under ten” with “uncomprehending eyes,” to the store to buy salt.¹²⁶ While at the store, Lily meets her father for the first time. Several days after this interaction, Nelson Barry turns up at the house of Lily and Magoun and declares that he “wants [Lily]” and that “my sister

¹²⁴William E. Castle et al., eds., *Heredity and Eugenics; a Course of Lectures Summarizing Recent Advances in Knowledge in Variation, Heredity, and Evolution and Its Relation to Plant, Animal and Human Improvement and Welfare* (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1913). 282.

¹²⁵ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun” in *The Golden Book Magazine* 11, no 10 (October 1925): 2.

¹²⁶ Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” 3, 2.

and I will take care of my daughter.”¹²⁷ Magoun soon realizes that Nelson wants custody of Lily in order to sell her as a wife to his gambling partner Willis to pay back debts. Magoun then takes Lily out of town and attempts to get Lawyer Mason and his wife to adopt her to keep her out of her father’s hands. When the couple refuses because they “cannot take a child with Barry blood in her veins,” Magoun lets Lily eat poison nightshade berries.¹²⁸ As Lily dies of the poison berries, Magoun reassures her that after she dies she “will never be sick no more... sickness won’t mean anything.”¹²⁹ Nelson Barry turns up before Lily dies to witness the moment of her death looking “unutterably sad, because of his incapability of the truest sadness.”¹³⁰ It is, in summary, a story in which a grandmother kills her cognitively disabled granddaughter to prevent her from being prostituted by her father. Lily’s death is both an act motivated by mercy and a eugenic act on the part of her grandmother. If Lily had been allowed to go with her father she would have undoubtedly continued the Barry line.

Lily’s cognitive disability is made from the same mold as that of earlier female characters. Lily’s most distinguishing characteristic is her childishness, her innocence marked by the ragdoll she carries around and refuses to put down, her face which “looked only a child, although she was nearly fourteen,” and her “uncomprehending eyes...filled with one of the innocent reveries of childhood.”¹³¹ She is seduced into trusting her father with offers of candy. Upon meeting her father, “hereditary instincts and nature itself...[assert] themselves in the

¹²⁷ Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” 2-3.

¹²⁸ Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” 11.

¹²⁹ Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” 14.

¹³⁰ Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” 15.

¹³¹ Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” 2.

child's innocent, receptive breast."¹³² Her cognitive disability takes the form of a developmental delay, making Barry's desire to marry her off to Jim Willis even more reprehensible.

However, Lily is not the only female form which cognitive disability takes in "Old Woman Magoun." When Magoun and Nelson Barry are discussing his desire to adopt Lily, he insists that "I will take her and Isabel will look after her."¹³³ Magoun declares "Your half-witted sister?" to which Barry replies, "She knows more than you think."¹³⁴ Magoun's retort to this is only "More wickedness."¹³⁵ In the only scene where she is present, Isabel is seen mixing drinks for her brother and Jim Willis, evidence of her training in the ways of "wickedness."¹³⁶ Isabel is, in this case, the woman taught wicked ways by men, an easy object of seduction without the faculties to realize the error of her ways. This is a new trope of female disability. While the innocent, childlike variety remains in Lily, the adult woman with cognitive disabilities is no longer the angel seen in Hetty or even the martyr character of Knitting Susan. She is now a danger and a threat to the community, easily coerced and without moral guidance.

Isabel's wickedness, her servile position to evil men, is positioned as Lily's future when the Masons refuse to adopt her by saying "we cannot take a child with Barry blood in her veins. The stock has run out; it is vitiated physically and morally. It won't do."¹³⁷ The refusal to raise Lily because of her degraded bloodline is a purely eugenic decision, and, in making it, the Masons effectively condemn Lily either to death or to a life of wickedness. Lily's grandmother

¹³² Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," 4.

¹³³ Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," 8.

¹³⁴ Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," 8.

¹³⁵ Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," 8.

¹³⁶ Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," 9.

¹³⁷ Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," 11.

makes the decision for her in a precursor to the mercy killings of the 1930s. She lets Lily eat the poison berries both so that she will not have to endure a life with her father and Jim Willis, but also so that she will not give birth to children with the same fate as herself. In this act, Old Woman Magoun becomes the enforcer of eugenics, the female activist and reformer whose role in on-the-ground eugenic work is proposed by Goddard in *The Kallikak Family*. This short story provides an enactment of every role for women within the narrative of eugenics and feeble-mindedness, illustrating the necessity of eugenic actors in order to avoid entering a cycle of abuse and evil.

The focus on the inevitable reproduction of eugenically “undesirable” traits is also a key component of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner creates a family, the Compsons, which seems to mirror the genetic patterns of the families in case studies like *The Kallikak Family*. The links that *The Kallikak Family* proposes between illnesses, mental health disorders, cognitive disability, and sexual activities are obvious within *The Sound and the Fury*. Every one of the Compson children has some attribute that would have been thought of as a genetic defect at the time: Benjy is a feeble-minded “idiot,” Jason is violent and impotent, Quentin is depressed and suicidal, and Caddy would have been regarded as “sexually immoral.” In addition to this, Mrs. Compson is bed-ridden and Mr. Compson is an alcoholic. Every living member of the Compson family has a trait that would be noted on one of Goddard’s family trees.

Faulkner establishes a history of degeneration on both sides of the family in the appendix he wrote in 1945, 16 years after the novel’s original publication, which details the lives, emotions, and thought processes of the Compson ancestors. According to this appendix,

the Compsons originally emigrated from Scotland after Culloden and began a mildly questionable bloodline in the United States. While the Compsons are ethnically “pure” (being from northwestern Europe), their ancestors display obsessive and insane tendencies. Often depicted in ways that denote mental illness or addiction, the Compsons appear to manifest the eugenic abnormality of their germ-plasm. The mild degeneracy of the Compson family tree is exacerbated by the Bascombe influence introduced by Caroline Compson (née Bascombe), the mother of Benjy, Jason, Caddy, and Quentin. The final deterioration into labeled undesirability is a product of the Compson-Bascombe combination by way of the mother; Caroline is the toxic female. Faulkner reveals this multiple times: when Mrs. Compson talks of her children she calls them her “punishment for putting aside my pride and marrying a man who put himself above me,” and Mr. Compson accuses her of “always [finding] excuses for your own blood.”¹³⁸ She is constantly depicted as weak and helpless, never straying far from her bed as she is experiencing the final symptoms of consumption. More affirmation of the dirtiness of the Bascombe blood comes in the form of her brother: “Uncle Maury didn’t work.”¹³⁹ Given that “pauperism” and “dependency” were believed to be genetically linked to feeble-mindedness, Maury’s economic status would have been a signal that Benjy’s feeble-mindedness was inherited from Caroline’s side of the family. Additionally, the name Maury itself translates to “dark skinned” or “Moorish” in Latin, implying a lower, or possibly non-, white race, a tainted whiteness. Furthermore, Benjy is originally named Maury, closely tying his “defect” to his mother’s bloodline. The contamination which dooms the Compson line to ultimate degeneration (as represented by

¹³⁸ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 103.

¹³⁹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 103.

Benjy's disability) is created by the unwise marriage of Jason Lycurgus Compson and Caroline Bascombe, a woman who is socially and racially below him.

Through Caroline Bascombe Compson, the familial degeneration originates in the female; through Caddy it is sustained in the same manner. Caddy is the second half of the dual identity of the feeble-minded female. She is displayed as shockingly "sexually immoral," having more than three sexual partners in her youth and eventually devolving into implied prostitution. Outspoken and active, Caddy is a eugenic danger to society through her sexual activities. She is also the only sibling to produce children. The idea of the replication of undesirable traits in the family is sustained through Caddy's daughter's name: Quentin. By naming her child after her mentally ill brother, Caddy creates a mirror, a replication, of Benjy's naming process and its consequences. The passing on of the name of a degenerate implies the propagation of unwanted traits to the next generation. Caddy's promiscuity is constantly criticized—through Benjy's reactions, Quentin's thoughts, and Jason's words— and her actions betray both her family and society as a whole. In the minds of early readers of the novel, toxic women would be blamed for the continuation of an unfit line, and therefore for the vast majority of society's problems. Caddy embodies the toxic female in *The Sound and the Fury* as Isabel does in "Old Woman Magoun."

Benjy's severe cognitive disability embodies the total degeneration of the Compson family line. He is, out of the characters surveyed thus far, most similar to Ellee in his level of ability. He is non-verbal, forms a close attachment to his sister, whom he follows everywhere, and communicates through animalistic sorts of noises. The severity of Benjy's disability has often led Faulkner critics to disregard it as anything but symbolic. Benjy's section of *The Sound*

and the Fury is often seen as “Faulkner’s formal experiment rather than as Benjy’s narrative.”¹⁴⁰

Critics argue that Faulkner was not intending Benjy as a realistic depiction of disability because of “his superb indifference to the tenets of naturalism...attested by contradictions too obvious not to be deliberate: Benjy is dumb, and yet he speaks; he is deaf and yet he can hear.”¹⁴¹ Such conclusions rely on simple, literal, terminology-dependent analyses of a multifaceted set of conditions. While Benjy might be able to speak and hear despite being referred to in the book as “deaf” and “dumb,” he is also referred to as an “idiot,” a more scientific diagnosis which fits his character well. Critics’ assertions that Benjy is not an accurate representation of cognitive disability is founded on a lack of understanding of historical context. Instead, Benjy is a character constructed from and subject to eugenic rhetoric.

In addition to eugenic rhetoric, Benjy is also subject to eugenic sterilization and segregation, being castrated and eventually institutionalized by his brother Jason. In his appendix, Faulkner writes that Jason

following a fumbling abortive attempt by his idiot brother on a passing female child, had himself appointed the idiot’s guardian without letting their mother know and so was able to have the creature castrated before the mother even knew it was out of the house, and who following the mother’s death in 1933 was able to free himself forever...from the idiot brother.¹⁴²

Jason, sometimes referenced as the “only sane Compson,” enacts eugenic ideals by first sterilizing (castrating) and then institutionalizing his brother.¹⁴³ However, the question remains

¹⁴⁰Stacy Burton, “Benjy, Narrativity, and the Coherence of Compson History,” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 7 no. 2 (Autumn-Winter 1995): 207-228. 214.

¹⁴¹ André Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976). 67.

¹⁴² Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 339.

¹⁴³ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 340.

about whether castrating Benjy is actually necessary. Because Benjy is an “idiot,” and not a more able “moron” or “imbecile,” his castration is eugenically unnecessary. Of “idiots,” Samuel Holmes wrote:

From a eugenics standpoint the very lowest types of mental defectives...do not present a very difficult problem as they cannot care for themselves and are...usually kept as institutional charges where they cannot propagate their kind. Similarly the low grades of the feebleminded are quite easily dealt with so that there is a tendency for the very lowest types of mentality to disappear of themselves... the lower grades of mental defect belong to poor physical stock which has a natural tendency to become extinct. It is the higher grades of feeblemindedness which are eugenically and socially the greatest menace.¹⁴⁴

While the reader is led to believe that Benjy’s castration is necessary because of his “fumbling, abortive attempt...on a passing female child,” we also understand that his physical characteristics themselves stop him from being able to reproduce or attack others. His disability “[aborts]” his attack before it even begins. Benjy is, as an “idiot,” not a proper candidate for sterilization at all. However, he is the perfect candidate for the institutionalization which later takes place; Benjy will never be able to support himself, and therefore has no reason to be integrated with the rest of society for economic production.

The fact that Benjy poses no eugenic threat is essential to his character within the novel. As the women in the novel take on the threatening reproductive role ascribed to them by eugenicists like H.H. Goddard, Benjy reclaims the role of the “angelic” cognitively disabled character traditionally held by women like Hetty and Knitting Susan. Benjy is the “innocent” idiot, even, at some moments, embodying biblical figures. He is, as John Earl Bassett pointed

¹⁴⁴ Holmes, *The Trend of the Race*, 29-30.

out, “the only one who can really be called ‘innocent’ in the novel.”¹⁴⁵ Benjy is 33 years old in 1928, the year most of the novel takes place in, indicating that Benjy is a Christ figure. Benjy is not only associated with Jesus, but also with Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob’s children who is sold into slavery in Egypt and one of the four ancient Israelites in the Hebrew bible who died without sin. Of this association, Faulkner writes that Benjy is “our lastborn, sold into Egypt.”¹⁴⁶ Benjy’s association with various biblical figures later betrayed by their disciples or brothers leads us to understand his non-necessary castration as a betrayal by his own brother.

Furthermore, Benjy operates as “a mirror of moral conscience, in which the various members of the family can see their own actions reflected and implicitly evaluated.”¹⁴⁷ Benjy is, then, angel and judge, very much assuming the same religious role as Hetty does: a representative of the divine, an innocent subjected to a world in which she cannot operate. With the emergence of the feebleminded female character as the source of dysgenic reproduction, the cognitively disabled woman has become the monster. This leaves room for the male character to assume her position as innocent and angelic.

While eugenic ideology had been prevalent in the United States for some time before the 1920s, this decade saw drastic revisions to the role gender played in the conception of cognitive disability. In the 1920s, the medical stereotype of the toxic, degenerate female made its way into literature, causing the typical archetypes of disability to switch gender. No longer is the disabled adult woman allowed to be angelic or moral but is instead deeply promiscuous

¹⁴⁵ John Earl Bassett, “Family Conflict in *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 1–20. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 340.

¹⁴⁷ André Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels, from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August* (Indiana University Press, 1990). 29.

and, in that, dangerous. The angelic cognitively disabled man has taken her place; he is now non-threatening and linked to ideas of purity and morality previously labeled female. While he suffers the consequences of eugenics, he is not the main target, and because of this becomes less monstrous. The man labeled with cognitive disability is no longer the one who must be sterilized, institutionalized, or killed in order to maintain eugenic ideals of procreation, but rather he is simply a byproduct of the actions of the “feeble-minded” woman. The female body, as the site of reproduction, has now become monstrous in place of the male.

Chapter 6

Mercy Killings of Innocent Monsters, 1927-1940

The narrative of innocence surrounding the cognitively disabled takes a dark turn as America progresses into the 1930s. As eugenic ideology was, more and more, being upheld and legitimized by state and national lawmaking forces, it was simultaneously beginning to face pushback from the scientific and medical community. Scientists published articles questioning the simplistic hereditary arguments that eugenics was built on. In his book *A Merciful End: The Euthanasia Movement in Modern America*, Ian Dowbiggan describes the 1930s as a period in which

a consensus started to form that while the theory behind eugenics itself was not altogether wrong, its hereditarian basis was shaky. Geneticists argued that there were no single-unit hereditary characters for traits such as alcoholism, crime, or [intellectual disability] ... anthropologists contended that culture and environment were at least as powerful as instinct, biology, and nature in accounting for the differences among human groups.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Ian Dowbiggan, *A Merciful End: the Euthanasia Movement in Modern America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36.

In response to this turn in the scientific community, eugenicists changed their rhetoric to focus on the economic impact of cognitive disability, a line of argument which had previously been secondary to that of genetic decline. The desire to take more drastic action against the cognitively disabled (and, additionally, to save the money used for their care) led to the birth of the America euthanasia movement. By the 1930s, active euthanasia (euthanizing non-consenting individuals on the ground of intellectual disability or incurable illness) had long been a goal of some factions of the eugenics movement, having been suggested as a way of curbing “defective” procreation and minimizing institutional care costs as early as 1904. In 1906, the legislature of the state of Ohio considered a bill which would “empower physicians to chloroform permanently diseased and mentally incapacitated persons.”¹⁴⁹ The suggestion of euthanasia for those with cognitive disabilities became increasingly common, as Edwin Black notes:

By 1910, the idea of sending the unfit into lethal chambers was regularly bandied about in American sociological and eugenic circles... In 1911, E. B Sherlock’s book, *The Feeble-minded: A Guide of Study*

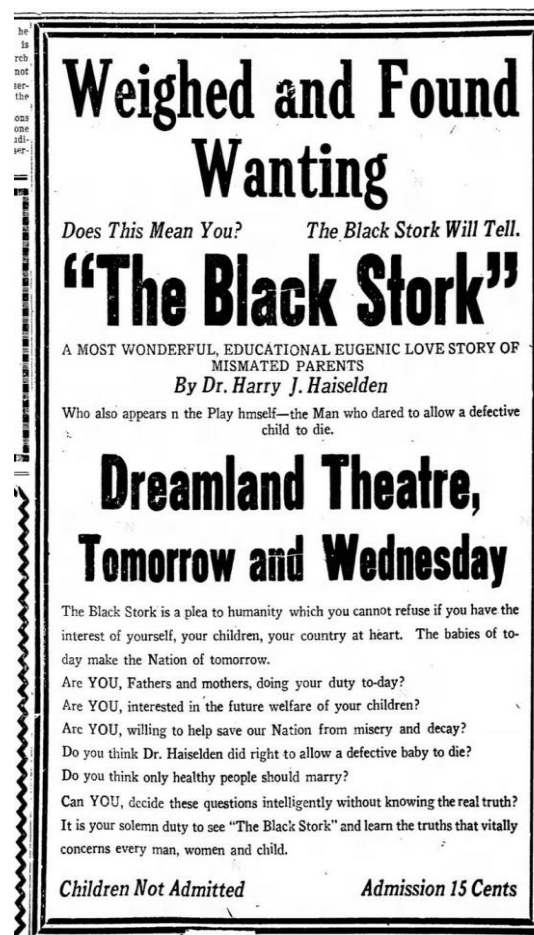


Image 1: *The Chronicle-Telegram* (Elyria, Ohio), Dec. 17, 1917.

¹⁴⁹ Edwin Black, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and American’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 250.

and Practice, acknowledged that “glib suggestions of the erection of lethal chambers are common enough...”¹⁵⁰

Eugenic euthanasia became a more popular topic in 1917 with the release of the movie *The*

Black Stork, a cinematic reenactment of the work of Dr. Harry

Haiselden’s eugenically motivated refusal to treat physically disabled babies. In the movie, Dr. Haiselden refuses to operate on a baby because he is sure that the child will grow up to be feeble-minded.

The baby dies, and then ascends into the waiting arms of Jesus. After using lethal neglect to enact his eugenic ideals, the real Dr. Haiselden remarked, “Which do you prefer—six days of Baby Bollinger or seventy years of Jukes?”¹⁵¹ *The Black Stork* created a months-long, nation-wide interest in eugenically motivated euthanasia for babies and children, which resulted in an uptick in the number of accounts of lethal neglect in hospitals and institutions.

By the 1930s, the euthanasia movement had become a nationally relevant phenomenon with the birth of the Euthanasia Society of America in 1938 (which had already existed for four years under a different name). An opinion poll published in 1939 from coast to coast in the United States had found that 46% of Americans

avored “mercy deaths under government supervision for hopeless invalids.”¹⁵² Active



Image 2, top: *New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 16, 1939.

Image 3, middle: *New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 13, 1939.

Image 4, bottom: *New York Times* (New York, NY), May 12, 1939.

¹⁵⁰ Black, *War Against the Weak*, 251.

¹⁵¹ Black, *War Against the Weak* 253.

¹⁵² “The Public is Divided on Mercy Deaths.” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1939.

euthanasia had risen to a height of awareness (and even popularity) through a series of high-profile “mercy killings” of women and children labeled with cognitive disabilities or mental illnesses at the hands of their husbands or parents. Proponents of active euthanasia argued that it must be legalized to spare the victims the pain of “mercy killings” performed by non-professionals. In addition to the mercy killings enacted by family members, institutions began to take similar measures. For instance, an institution in Illinois fed many of its feeble-minded patients milk from tubercular cows¹⁵³; other institutions engaged in forms of lethal neglect such as exposure to heat or cold. Many of these killings, both institutional and private, were justified by rhetoric focusing on both the suffering of the labeled, murdered individuals and the suffering of their caregivers. Through arguments which revolved around the devaluation of life with disabilities or mental illnesses, active euthanasia advocates suggested setting up local gas chambers across the U.S. which would be used to kill infants and children who showed signs of cognitive disability. All of this was accomplished using narratives, like that of *The Black Stork*, which stressed the innocence of cognitively disabled children and the suffering they would face if they were allowed to live out their “unfit” lives.

The rhetoric surrounding active euthanasia of those with disabilities was both more extreme and more personalized than that of earlier eugenic projects. This was, in part, due to the newfound emphasis on the economic and emotional burden the living individual with cognitive disabilities placed on their immediate family. While “stemming the tide” of “undesirable” reproduction was still a goal of eugenic euthanasia, the scientific advances which

¹⁵³ This “experiment” functioned under the assumption that tuberculosis was a genetic condition and those with strong “germ plasms” would survive the infection.

threw doubt on the possibility of eliminating the condition genetically necessitated new arguments which targeted the extant disabled individual for extermination. These new arguments leaned heavily on language of monstrosity and deformity, of animalistic tendencies, and of uselessness. In an example of this type of language, Ann Mitchell, a high-ranking board member and top donor to the ESA, declared that she hoped WWII would “last a long time” so that Great Britain and America could follow Germany’s lead and conduct “biological house cleaning” through using “euthanasia as a war measure, including euthanasia for the insane, feeble-minded monstrosities.”¹⁵⁴ While this language is notably absent from the fictional depictions of cognitive disability which I studied from the time period, it is undoubtedly descended from the comparisons of the cognitively disabled to animals (especially predatory or rabid animals) that appear in all of the works examined thus far. Fictional depictions of the burden that cognitive disability placed on the family, and on the wider community, fueled the active euthanasia movement just as much as reports of “mercy killings” in papers across the country.

Much like the eugenics movement, some major American literary figures including, white writers such as Sherwood Anderson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, vocally supported active euthanasia. In Britain, H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw were vocal proponents of the Voluntary Euthanasia Legislation Society (which had barely concealed ambitions to legalize

¹⁵⁴ Dowbiggan, *A Merciful End*, 55.

This quote also addresses the close ties between American and German euthanasia movements. In fact, in the years preceding WWII Nazi labs were funded by donations of almost \$4 million from both the Rockefeller and Carnegie institutes. Hitler even wrote what Edwin Black describes as “fan letters” to American eugenicists, in one of which he cites an American eugenics textbook as “his bible.” Hitler modeled German eugenics and euthanasia programs on those both already in place and those which had been suggested in the U.S., paying special attention to talk of local “lethal chambers” as a means for exterminating the “unfit.”

active euthanasia as well). Gilman went so far as to elect euthanasia for herself when she committed suicide by chloroform in order to avoid the effects of terminal cancer. In addition to enacting voluntary euthanasia, Gilman supported active euthanasia as well. Dowbiggan notes that she “endorsed...the community’s right to perform ‘social surgery’ by mercy killing persons who were no longer useful to fellow human beings. She lamented the ‘dragging weight of the grossly unfit’ and urged their liquidation in the interests of ‘the normal and progressive.’”¹⁵⁵ Narratives of wasted resources and unnecessary suffering provided propaganda for the euthanasia movement, which was propelled by the idea that “the purpose of euthanasia is to remove from society living creatures so monstrous, so deficient, so hopelessly insane that continued existence has for them no satisfactions and entails a heavy burden on society.”¹⁵⁶

“He,” a short story written by Katherine Anne Porter, is a prime example of the ways in which narratives of innocence and suffering were used to justify active euthanasia of the cognitively disabled community. The story, published in 1927, depicts the physical decline of the cognitively disabled character He, the unnamed son of Mr. and Mrs. Whipple. Initially, He’s physical health is sacrificed in favor of that of His siblings since “He don’t get hurt” because “the innocent walk with God.”¹⁵⁷ He’s physical abilities are depicted as outstripping those of His siblings:

He did grow and He never got hurt. A plank blew off the chicken house and struck Him on the head and He never seemed to know it. He had learned a few words, and after this He forgot them. He didn’t whine for food as the other children did, but waited until it was given Him; He ate squatting in the corner, smacking and mumbling. Rolls of fat covered Him like an overcoat, and He could carry twice as much wood and water as Adna. Emily had a cold in the head most

¹⁵⁵ Dowbiggan, *A Merciful End*, 35.

¹⁵⁶ Inez Philbrick quoted in Black, *War against the Weak*, 47.

¹⁵⁷ Katherine Anne Porter, “He,” in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1935), 63.

of the time...so in bad weather they gave her the extra blanket off His cot. He never seemed to mind the cold...He climbed the peach trees much better than Adna and went skittering along the branches like a monkey.¹⁵⁸

He's physical abilities seem to be in line with the exaggerated strength and agility often attributed to cognitively disabled male characters. However, He's physical abilities begin to decline shortly after an incident in which He is made to catch a pig for slaughter. When He shows remorse for assisting His parents in killing the pig, His mother boxes His ears. Immediately following, He is taken very ill. He temporarily gets well again, but then slips on the ice and has "some sort of fit."¹⁵⁹ The Whipples send for the doctor, all the while wondering how they'll pay for it. Eventually Mr. and Mrs. Whipple end up institutionalizing He, after a long discussion about how they don't want to have to accept charity by putting him in a state-funded institution. The story ends with Mrs. Whipple dropping He off at the asylum:

He worked His hands out and began rubbing His nose with His knuckles, and then with the end of the blanket. Mrs. Whipple couldn't believe what she saw; He was scrubbing away big tears that pulled out of the corners of His eyes... Mrs. Whipple kept saying, "Oh, honey, you don't feel so bad, do you? You don't feel so bad, do you?" for He seemed to be accusing her of something... maybe he knew they were sending Him away for good and all because they were too poor to keep Him. Whatever it was, Mrs. Whipple couldn't bear to think of it... His head rolled on her shoulder: she had loved Him as much as she possibly could, there were Adna and Emly who had to be thought of too, there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life. Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born.¹⁶⁰

By the end of the story, it is obvious that He is going to the institution to die, and that He will die alone and without His parents or siblings, in an unfamiliar environment. "He" is a deeply

¹⁵⁸ Porter, "He," 63

¹⁵⁹ Porter, "He," 74.

¹⁶⁰ Porter, "He" 77.

upsetting story in which poverty drives the Whipples not only to abuse their son (forcing him to sleep and work in the cold, physically harming him, etc.) but also to abandon him at the moment in which He is the most vulnerable. “He” is a story of a family driven into deeper poverty by having a son with cognitive disabilities that they can neither care for nor understand. Mr. and Mrs. Whipple end up heartbroken because they must intern Him in the state institution to be able to support their other children. It is, in effect, a trade, placing their son in the care of other people and agreeing never to see Him again in order to save money to feed and clothe their remaining children.

The Whipples’ neglect of He throughout the story mirror various methods of active euthanasia suggested by physicians (like Haiselden) looking to enact eugenics through lethal neglect. In particular, proponents of active euthanasia listed lethal exposure to cold or heat as a way in which institutions, as well as individual physicians, could kill those with cognitive disabilities. The Whipples’ willingness to sacrifice He’s comfort and health for that of his siblings or to uphold appearances partially replicates this practice. On the first pages of the story, we learn that He is often made to sleep or work in the cold because His parents take his clothing or blankets to ensure that his neurotypical siblings are warm enough.

In addition to this type of physical abuse, Mrs. Whipple often forces He to complete dangerous tasks to prove His worth to their neighbors and friends. At the very beginning of the story, we learn that the neighbors think that it would be “the Lord’s pure mercy if He should die” and that His disability is caused by “the sins of the fathers...bad blood and bad doing somewhere.”¹⁶¹ “He” is a visible sign of shame for the family. Mrs. Whipple therefore feels the

¹⁶¹ Porter, “He,” 62.

need to repeatedly assert that “He’s as able as any other child” and forces Him to do work which He does not want to do both to prove his value and to spare the other children from having to perform it. After He gets sick, Mrs. Whipple initially refuses to send him to the institution, where the doctor says he can get better care, because “She couldn’t stand to be pitied. ‘No, not if it comes to it that we have to live in a wagon and pick cotton around the country...nobody’s going to get a chance to look down on us.’”¹⁶² When He is finally taken to the institution, Mrs. Whipple refuses the hospital ambulance because she “couldn’t stand to see Him going away looking so sick as all that.”¹⁶³ Mrs. Whipple’s concern about appearances, about what the neighbors will think, eventually ends up being, in some ways, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because she feels the need to push He to prove his worth, because she keeps Him out of the hospital for so long to resist accepting charity, His disability worsens to the point where we know He will die shortly after arriving at the institution. It is “a mortal pity He was ever born” because His family does not understand Him well enough or have enough resources to keep him safe or productive.¹⁶⁴ His life ends up sending His family further into poverty and causing heartbreak, both for Him and Mrs. Whipple. All of the consequences could have been avoided if he had never been born, reaffirming the neighbor’s original sentiment that it would be “the Lord’s pure mercy if he should die.”¹⁶⁵

Porter juxtaposes the physical neglect which He faces at the hands of His parents Mrs. Whipple’s continual assertions that she loves Him. She is “forever saying” that “[she] loved her second son, the simple-minded one, better than she loved the other two children put

¹⁶² Porter, “He,” 64.

¹⁶³ Porter, “He,” 76.

¹⁶⁴ Porter, “He,” 78.

¹⁶⁵ Porter, “He,” 62.

together.”¹⁶⁶ These assertions are also in conversation with the euthanasia movement, which, stemming from the emphasis on female procreation and morality seen in the eugenics movement, placed the burden of active euthanasia of disabled babies and children on their mothers. Inez Philbrick often emphasized that women carry “the responsibility of seeing that no child is born with handicap, that motherhood be released from bondage, and made a function of freedom, choice, and beauty.”¹⁶⁷ It is, then, the female guardian’s duty to euthanize, to sterilize, and to institutionalize their child. The murder of Lily by her grandmother in “Old Woman Magoun” is an earlier example of this type of action. While Old Woman Magoun is, because of her “mercy killing” of her granddaughter, a sort of hero of active euthanasia, Mrs. Whipple’s resistance to doing the same to He would have made her the opposite. However, unlike in “Old Woman Magoun,” the concern surrounding He is not one of reproduction but rather of economic burden; the possibility of He having children is never mentioned, but there are descriptions of the ways which He’s presence perpetuates the poverty of His family. This is the new argument for euthanasia: it is not the economic burden of He’s descendants that needs to be eliminated, but rather the economic and emotional burden of He himself. “He” is, then, a new type of political narrative of cognitive disability. It is not only eugenic, but also euthanistic. He’s poor treatment by His family is not simply Porter’s method of creating an emotional response, but it is also meant to convince the reader that the neighbors (and, in the end, Mrs. Whipple) are right: that it would be “God’s pure mercy if He should die.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Porter, “He,” 61.

¹⁶⁷ Philbrick quoted in Dowbiggan, *A Merciful End*, 47.

¹⁶⁸ Porter, “He,” 62.

A decidedly more famous mercy killing occurs in John Steinbeck's 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* when the cognitively disabled Lennie is shot in the head by his best friend George. Lennie, in many ways, epitomizes the combination of eugenics and euthanasia rhetoric: he is monstrous, instinct driven, sexually aggressive, and, because of these characteristics, emotionally and economically burdensome to his friends. Critically, he has been viewed primarily as an animal, as "one essential aspect of man—the animal appetites, the craving to touch and feel, the impulse toward immediate gratification of sensual desires."¹⁶⁹ These conclusions disregard the human portions of Lennie's character, his loyalty, his friendship, and his compassion; they reduce him to instinct and desire. Some analyses of *Of Mice and Men* even pay no attention at all to Lennie, ignoring the ethical dilemma involved in his murder to focus on the smaller social critiques the book contains. In his article "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*," Richard Hart states that "*Of Mice and Men*...[allows] us to see and hear and feel ethical dilemmas and such social problems as racism, sexism, and economic exploitation in an immediate, firsthand way."¹⁷⁰ By ignoring the central question of the book—that of disability—Hart and his fellows dismiss Lennie's humanity. Furthermore, most scholarship accepts Lennie's euthanasia as just and unproblematic. Scholarly statements such as "We should not read tragedy into Lennie's death," and "George's mercy killing of Lennie represents the culmination of their intensely symbiotic relationship" not only deny the tragedy of Lennie's death, but they celebrate George's heroism in his "mercy killing" of Lennie.¹⁷¹ This blind

¹⁶⁹ William Goldhurst, "Of 'Mice and Men': John Steinbeck's Parable of the Curse of Cain" *Western Literature Review* 6 no.2 (Summer 1971): 123-135. 132.

¹⁷⁰ Richard Hart, "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection," *The Steinbeck Review* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 31-44. 34.

¹⁷¹ Louis Owens, "Deadly Kids, Stinking Dogs, and Heroes: The Best Laid Plans in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*," *Western Literature Review* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 318-333. 323.

acceptance of Lennie's murder directly perpetuates the ableist discrimination against those with cognitive disabilities that characterized the eugenics and euthanasia movements in 1930s America. Because of analyses like these, Steinbeck has often been called a "non-teleological" writer, one who presents a situation without judgment or critique. In *Of Mice and Men*, it is only possible to call Steinbeck "non-teleological" within an understanding of Lennie which dismisses him as a potential victim, within a paradigm which regards him as less than human. A historically informed analysis of *Of Mice and Men* reveals the novel to be interested in questions of euthanasia and mercy killing on an international scale, presenting often conflicting conclusions about active euthanasia as WWII approaches.

Like He and Billy Budd before him, Lennie Small fits the eugenic stereotypes of male feeble-mindedness. A tall, lumbering, "bearlike" man with a "shapeless" face, arms "[hanging] loosely," his gargantuan size, slack muscles and undefined facial features resemble the physical characteristics eugenicists used to mark men with intellectual disabilities as dangerous.¹⁷² Lennie is immediately declared threatening, even monstrous, through his comparison to aggressive predators (bears). Lennie's association with large, powerful animals continues throughout the novel as he is also likened to bulls, horses, and dogs. Not only is Lennie the physical epitome of feeble-mindedness, but he is the psychological epitome as well. Lennie would be considered a "moron," a feeble-minded person with a mental age between eight and twelve who is almost able to blend in to society but who is easily coerced and who has

Brian Leahy Doyle, "Tragedy and the Non-teleological in *Of Mice and Men*," *The Steinbeck Review* 3, no 2 (Fall 2006): 79-86. 82.

¹⁷² John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (London: Penguin Books, 1993). 2-3.

uncontrollable tendencies to violence. Of this feeble-minded classification, David Rothman, a prominent 1930s psychiatrist, writes:

In the upper levels of mental retardation, the story is altogether different... the anti-social activities of this group are the nightmares of our community life...often strong, husky kids with a lust...for life, with psychodynamic drives that stop at nothing. They fall just short of the intellectual endowments necessary to hurdle the natural hazards that our complex social order erects.¹⁷³

Lennie fits this definition precisely: he is violent and sexual without intent and is unable to understand more than the simplest interactions. Lennie's disability becomes dangerous at many points in the book, but it comes to a head in his encounter with Curley's wife. In fact, Lennie's behavior only ever becomes truly problematic when he is alone with women. Lennie's repeated attacks on women serve to emphasize "stereotypical fears of disabled sexuality, depicting sexuality as an uncontrollable force that overrides Lennie's agency."¹⁷⁴ Lennie's coworker's perception of his interactions with women as overtly sexual paints him as not only a physically violent man, but also a lurking menace of dysgenic reproduction. Lennie's "moronic" feeble-mindedness is not the non-threatening, symbolic inconvenience of Benjy's "idiocy," but rather a promise of "regressive" reproduction waiting to be fulfilled. Lennie is the ultimate embodiment of the eugenic threat.

However, the threat that Lennie embodies is acceptable as long as he is economically productive. In a perfect combination of eugenic and pro-euthanasia argument, Lennie becomes economically (and emotionally) burdensome to George the moment he begins to act as a

¹⁷³ David Benjamin Rothman and Agnes A. Sharp, *Addresses and Papers, 1934-1948* (Chicago: Psychiatric Institute of the Municipal Court of Chicago, 1948). 48.

¹⁷⁴ Sonya Freeman Loftis, *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

eugenic threat. This moment occurs immediately at the beginning of the book when Lennie touches a woman's skirt inappropriately, causing George to lose his job and forcing them both to flee to a new ranch. While it seems that Lennie once again becomes economically productive on the new ranch, his accidental murder of Curley's wife causes them to lose their jobs once again; at this point, Lennie has proven that he is an economic burden. Owens, in his essay "Deadly Kids, Stinking Dogs, and Heroes: The Best Laid Plans in Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men,'" writes that: "Lennie is a profit-making machine valuable until it malfunctions, when it must be gotten rid of."¹⁷⁵ As a feeble-minded individual, Lennie can be tolerated because he is normalized. As long as he can perform physical labor without causing problems, he is socially acceptable. When he can no longer pass for normal, and begins to embody stereotypical feeble-mindedness, what emerges is the "logic of 'cure or kill' ...[the idea] that if the disabled body cannot be normalized, it must be eliminated."¹⁷⁶ George's mercy killing of Lennie occurs at the moment when normalization fails, when Lennie proves to be unable to support himself economically without becoming a eugenic threat. Because the euthanasia movement of the moment was concerned with the economic weight of each individual person with cognitive disabilities, continued life for Lennie is not an option within the paradigm of the eugenics or euthanasia movements.

Not only do Lennie's violent accidents prevent him from being a worthwhile labor investment, they also mean that he is no longer a valuable emotional investment for George. Much like Mrs. Whipple claims to love "He" more than her other children to look better in front

¹⁷⁵ Owens, "Deadly Kids, Stinking Dogs, and Heroes: The Best Laid Plans in Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men,'" 325.

¹⁷⁶ Freeman Loftis, *Imagining Autism*.

of her neighbors, George uses his association with Lennie to paint himself as a good person. Throughout the book, George and Lennie's relationship is inherently unequal; while Lennie relies on George to provide for him and protect him, George manipulates Lennie for "a [reminder] that caring for another person gives him a fuller identity."¹⁷⁷ Steinbeck unveils this dynamic in the opening scene of the book, when George characterizes their relationship by saying, "We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us...if them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us."¹⁷⁸ This comes directly after George manipulates Lennie by saying that he only stays with him because "Aunt Clara wouldn't like you running off by yourself" and that "somebody'd shoot you like a coyote if you was by yourself."¹⁷⁹ These assertions position Lennie as both reliant on and in debt to George, and George makes sure that Lennie knows it. This continues throughout the text as George exploits Lennie through what is called the "politics of help," which

[satisfies] emotional and power needs for those providing assistance, but not for people with disabilities. The territory of developmental disability serves professionals and bureaucratic structures providing supports, and not persons receiving them, forcing labeled persons to become objectified, reified, and commodified.¹⁸⁰

This becomes apparent at the end of the novel when, instead of allowing Lennie to make his own choice and to face the potential consequences of his actions, George performs a "mercy killing" on his friend. Steinbeck's later description of this scene cements George's heroism: "In hopelessness—George is able to rise to greatness—to kill his friend to save him. George is a

¹⁷⁷ Doyle, "Tragedy and the Non-teleological in *Of Mice and Men*," 84.

¹⁷⁸ Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 14.

¹⁷⁹ Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 13.

¹⁸⁰ Phil Smith, "Drawing New Maps: A Radical Cartography of Developmental Disabilities," *Review of Educational Research* 69, no. 2 (July 1, 1999): 131.

hero and only heroes are worth writing about.”¹⁸¹ Lennie’s only possible use left is to transform his friend into a hero through his own death. Lennie is commodified both physically and emotionally; and once his use to his bosses and to George is outpaced by his cost, once he has proven that he cannot be normalized, he is disposed of. This is, essentially, how literary critics have come to view *Of Mice and Men*: not as the story of Lennie’s tragedy, but as the tale of George’s heroism.

Lennie’s innocence contributes to this tale in the same way which He’s innocence contributed to the “cure or kill” logic in Porter’s story; because Lennie cannot be cured, he must be saved from the suffering that his disability has inevitably brought him. Within the logic of mercy killings, death is the best option for the disabled individual because life is unavoidably miserable due to cognitive disability. Steinbeck emphasizes Lennie’s innocence through heavy-handed biblical imagery: a corruption of the Good Friday-Easter Sunday Christian timeline in which Lennie is a Christ figure. Lennie’s figurative death, the moment at which he becomes an economic burden, occurs on a Friday. Friday is the day when Lennie and George must leave their jobs because of Lennie’s interactions with a woman. Lennie is murdered, which, when considered a mercy killing, reads as release, redemption, and freedom, on a Sunday. As a Christ figure, and as a cognitively disabled man in an era of active euthanasia against those with disabilities, Lennie’s death is both inevitable and puts an end to his suffering.

The Luger pistol which George uses to kill Lennie marks his murder as a political act. Used only by the German military in both WWI and WWII, the Luger pistol associates George’s

¹⁸¹ John Steinbeck, Elaine Steinbeck, and Robert Wallsten, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (New York: Viking Press, 1975). 563

“mercy killing” of Lennie with German euthanasia-eugenics programs, which had been in place in both concentration camps and in state institutions for the disabled or mentally ill for at least four years.¹⁸² Given Steinbeck’s specification of a German gun and his assertions that the “mercy killing” is a heroic act, it seems that *Of Mice and Men* is, in many ways, a statement supporting active euthanasia of those with cognitive disabilities in the United States.

The desire to murder individuals with cognitive disabilities grows out of the placelessness that characterizes cognitive disability in American fiction as far back as 1830. The tendency of nineteenth century characters with cognitive disabilities to die as soon as their guardians are no longer able to take care of them is really not so different from the institutionalization and mercy killings seen in early twentieth century American fiction; both endings emphasize that the cognitively disabled have no place in American society, particularly if they are unable to be economically productive. The major difference is the role of the private family within public life: while in the earlier fiction the family is allowed to care for their own, reproduction and family planning become public domain in the twentieth century. The question of cognitive disability mutates: by the 1860s, it’s no longer about whether or not the family can care for the individual, but whether the individual can be cured; by the 1890s the question isn’t about cure but about economic productivity; by 1915, it is a question of segregating cognitively disabled individuals; by 1940, a question of killing them altogether. The question is, however, still entirely family based—it is about the family’s responsibility to their child, but also about their responsibility to protect society from their supposedly dangerous child.

¹⁸² The first gas chambers installed in concentration camps were initially installed in German state hospitals, where they were used to murder the mentally ill and cognitively disabled, before being moved to the camps.

These themes of public safety and familial responsibility dominate the narratives of cognitive disability which we still read from this era. These narratives, some of which are staples of high school and college reading lists, still color our understanding of what cognitive disability is, what individuals with cognitive disabilities are capable of, and the behaviors which cognitive disability entails. It is a narrative which emphasizes both innocence and monstrosity, presenting the cognitively disabled as instinctually violent and animalistic individuals who will always be a burden to their families and to society but who are well-intentioned and pure. The stereotypes of cognitive disability portrayed in such narratives not only promote a generalized fear of the cognitively disabled, but also justify violence done to them by their caretakers.¹⁸³ The conflicted ideas of cognitive disability presented in works of American fiction converge into one message: that the cognitively disabled have no unproblematic place within our society.

The great importance of understanding these works, and especially of considering the cultures in which they were created, lies in our own reproduction of the ideas they contain. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson writes that “the storied quality of disability invents and reinvents the world we share,” and without a thorough knowledge of the tales behind this invention and reinvention, it is impossible to realize the effects portrayals of disability have on our modern lives.¹⁸⁴ The narratives of the cognitively disabled characters greatly influence the social understanding of what cognitive disability is, and what place and value it should be given within society. While a narrative like Hetty’s promotes the understanding of cognitive disability as a

¹⁸³ For a great article on narratives of caretaker murders, see “Autpocalypse Then, Autpocalypse Now” at Autistext.com, <http://autistext.com/2017/03/04/autpocalypse-then-autpocalypse-now/>.

“Autpocalypse Then, Autpocalypse Now,” last modified March 4, 2017

¹⁸⁴ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation,” *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 1, 2005): 522–27. 523.

gift from the divine for a specific purpose, one like Lennie's attempts to convince the reader that the cognitively disabled will never be able to live safely within our communities. While Hetty and Lennie's characters are fundamentally fairly similar, both innocent, well-intentioned figures associated with God who die at the hands of people who are meant to be their friends, their narratives concerning the place and value of cognitive disability couldn't be more different. Over a century, narratives of cognitive disability have used a relatively static set of tropes to express greatly differing iterations of the idea that people with cognitive disabilities have no place within society. Though various recombinations of an unchanging set of characteristics, narratives of cognitive disability in American fiction betray a drastic turn in the American psyche between 1830 and 1940 concerning the treatment of those with cognitive disabilities—by 1940, “the world invented” by the “storied quality of disability” no longer tolerates the cognitively disabled, but rather makes them the target of elimination.

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