

Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel (2020) by Clare Walker Gore

Heidi Logan

Clare Walker Gore's *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* elucidates how disabled characters are differently positioned in and make differing contributions to plots in the melodramatic Dickensian novel, the sensation novel, the domestic novel, and the realist novel, following an underpinning claim that "the positioning of such characters was an important marker of generic affiliation throughout the period" (4). Since nineteenth-century literature reflects the "socially constructed" nature of disability (5), "we cannot read the bodies of characters in the same way in different kinds of novels" (7). Throughout *Plotting Disability*, Gore explores "the connection between disability as a social identity and disability as incapacity in novelistic characterisation" (2) – in other words, Gore examines whether being "a disabled character might ... mean being disabled as a character" and tests "which characters are able to play which roles in which plots" (3).

The study's first chapter, examining works by Charles Dickens, considers how specific details about a character's embodiment indicate whether they are and shall remain a 'minor' character or whether the character is meant to be recognised as central by readers. We know certain characters in Dickens are minor because they have "distinctive, distorted bodies" (22); Dickens's "externalised aesthetics" maps "social categories of embodiment on to literary categories of characterisation" (24) and uses disability to externalise personality traits. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), the "bodily peculiarities" of the boys at Dotheboys Hall (26) mark them as stigmatised, but the hero, Nicholas, has "a blank, generic body" (28).

Occasionally, a disabled Dickensian character appears to be intended for a major role – yet ambiguous depictions suggest that they struggle to live up to this. For example, in *Little Dorrit* (1857), the eponymous character's self-induced freakish littleness, representative of her "self-deprivation" (54), initially leaves Arthur oblivious to her in romantic terms. "Little Dorrit's body," therefore, "seems to register a kind of resistance to the role she has to play" as the heroine (55).

Plotting Disability next focuses on sensation novels by Wilkie Collins. The overarching factor Gore identifies in Collins's work is a highly distinctive, repeated assault on our ability to read bodies. *The Moonstone* (1868), for example, features an array of

characters with unreliable bodies, making “the body itself ... an unreliable sign” (75). Such dedication to unreliability means that “character becomes plot,” with unstable bodies driving an unstable plot (76). The unpredictable Collins often reverses “the reader’s preconceptions about a disabled character’s relationship to plot” (15).

Another chapter focusing on the domestic novel, represented by Dinah Mulock Craik and Charlotte Yonge, focuses on what disabled characters contribute (or cannot contribute) to the marriage plot. Gore argues that Craik and Yonge reconfigure traditional associations between the domestic and the feminine so that disability becomes “a way to positively represent feminine qualities” and to provide alternatives for female characters other than marriage (16). These novels are the least canonical of those examined: it may well be that domestic fiction’s frequent engagement with disability is “part of why it was denigrated” (14).

The highly engaging, impressive chapter on “Physical Frailty and Moral Inheritance in George Eliot and Henry James” provides a fascinating outline of the developing use of the ‘redemptive disability plot’ in a number of famous ‘realist’ texts. When disabled characters are shut out of marriage plots, they may instead insert themselves into plots of financial or moral ‘inheritance’. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), although Philip is disabled, *he* does not prompt moral development in the able-bodied Maggie. Instead, through her love and self-sacrifice, Maggie induces a moral epiphany in Philip, helping him regain a wish to live. The redemptive disability plot also has ostensible success in *Daniel Deronda* (1876): the consumptive Mordecai is given almost unlimited power as a ‘saintly invalid’ and finds a ‘second self’ in Daniel, appropriating Daniel’s life in service of his own religious goals (194). Mordecai may be read as giving the novel a plot (187). Yet the character Leonora provides a more troubling reading of such developments, suggesting that Mordecai stops Daniel from living his own life (197-8).

The ‘redemptive disability plot’ goes truly awry in the two Henry James novels considered. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the consumptive Ralph Touchett, a mere ‘spectator’ of life, leaves an inheritance to his cousin Isabel Archer. Ralph tells others that the aim of his bequest is to allow Isabel to live as she wishes. However, his less admirable motivations for giving money to Isabel include simply amusing himself and living vicariously through her: his decision is to Isabel’s detriment as she becomes the target of fortune-seekers.

Particularly interesting is the effect created by *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) as readers are never told the true nature of Milly's malady: Milly refuses to admit that she is terminally ill and the narrator barely discusses her illness (216). Gore argues that Milly's ability to bring moral clarity to the other characters is severely compromised in direct proportion to the degree that James occludes details about her illness. James himself viewed *The Wings of the Dove* as "deformed," and Gore contends that it is precisely this "need to conceal Milly's increasingly deformed body" – this resistance to give Milly her proper place as heroine – "that deforms the text" (219).

Lastly, *Plotting Disability's* "Coda" outlines a cultural change from a mid-Victorian readiness to depict disability (even if sentimentally or as marginal) to a late-nineteenth-century repugnance toward disability. As Gore notes, modernist novelists like E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence later represented physical disability as revolting or morally reprehensible, perhaps as part of a modernist urge to repudiate Victorian values (232-3).

Plotting Disability rather elegantly demonstrates that disabled characters perform a variety of narrative work in nineteenth-century novels and that this work does not merely reflect changing cultural values but also the expectations raised by novel genres that each adopt different approaches to engaging with "the most unstable of identity categories" (5).