

# **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO POST-DISABILITY LITERARY CRITICISM**

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this presentation is to introduce what I call a post-disability approach to literary studies. Firstly, I will explain what is meant by the term post-disability; secondly, I will endeavour to justify its coinage; and thirdly, I will provide a brief post-disability reading of two extracts from the filmic versions of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. The extracts are very short, but the reading will reveal many implicit references to constructs of "the sighted" and "the blind", a binary split that illustrates the Derridean, deconstructive process of *différance* and resonates with the Anglo-American science of eugenics.

**(1) What do I mean by a Post-Disability approach?**

According to the work of disability scholars such as Vic Finkelstein, Mike Oliver and Colin Barnes, the source of a person's impairment is in her or his medical condition, but the source of disability is in society. This model is central to the concept of post-disability criticism and as such warrants emphasis at this early juncture. The social model of disability holds that many persons are impaired in many ways, but that it is only by society that they become disabled. People are impaired, but society disables.

It follows that in a progressive society disability is not a necessity, that impairment need not result in disability, which is the conceptual basis for post-disability criticism. Bearing in mind that literature informs and is informed by society, a post-disability reading is one that is critical of the way in which society disables people who have impairments, a reading that is critical of the way in which impairment is depicted as tragic, disabling, abnormal and so on.

**(2) How do I justify the coinage of this term?**

Thanks to Georg Lukacs, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Valery Traub, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and so on, the literary scholars who have made psychocultural and psychosocial issues the focus of their work, the white, middle-class, heterosexual male is no longer assumed supreme, or even authoritative, no longer posited as Self in literature without contention. From secondary education to doctoral research and beyond, all levels of literary studies have come to involve modes of interpretation that are appreciative of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity.

This is just as it should be, but what about disability? In the research paper 'Disability and the Rhetoric of Inclusive Higher Education', which will be published in February's issue of The Journal of Further and Higher Education (2005), I point out that gender and ethnicity are advertised as key aspects in more than half of the available undergraduate English courses, while a single prospectus refers to disability in relation to content. This solitary reference is made when Aberdeen University

states that the field work aspects of its English course might pose difficulties to students with disabilities, that alternative arrangements will be made available. In other words, the only manifest inclusion constitutes yet another latent exclusion.

My contention is that disability should not be an incidental aspect of literary studies. It is imperative that disability is posited alongside gender, ethnicity and class in the prospectus of each university that offers English, alongside gender, ethnicity and class as a key component of the Level One approaches to literature module, alongside gender, ethnicity and class as an option for specialisation at Level Two and Level Three; and, consequently, alongside gender, ethnicity and class as no reason for an English undergraduate to feel that her or his inclusion is rhetorical. Without this inclusion the taxonomy of approaches to literary studies is outmoded.

In order to support the argument I will now demonstrate that while the post-disability approach is distinct from the others, it belongs to the same taxonomy. For example, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) defines a school of thought that is

based on ontological and epistemological distinctions between "the Orient" and "the Occident". Is it not the case that numerous writers have also accepted the distinction between persons with impairments and those without impairments as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels and social descriptions?

This question can be answered in the affirmative even if the vast majority of impairments is not considered, when attention is paid to portrayals of persons with impaired vision alone. Sheffield University offers a module about contemporary literature that involves the study of four key texts, two of which contain central blind characters - namely, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) and James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994). Other universities offer English modules that consider works including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Rudyard Kipling's *The Light That Failed* (1891), George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), J. M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints* (1905) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), all of which contain blind characters. Indeed,

canonical representations of persons with impaired vision have been created by Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Victor Hugo, R. L. Stevenson, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Jack London, H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Andre Gide, D. H. Lawrence, Bertolt Brecht, Dylan Thomas, Daphne du Maurier, Raymond Carver, Brian Friel, Margaret Atwood and so on. It is evident, therefore, that the lack of literary criticism that is appreciative of disability does not reflect a lack of primary material.

### **(3) A Post-Disability Reading**

In order to further demonstrate pertinence to the taxonomy of approaches to literary studies, I will now draw on psychoanalytic theory in a brief post-disability reading of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Under Milk Wood*. Accordingly, while scrutinising the following two clips, particular attention should be paid to phallic imagery as well as to the way in which visual impairment is portrayed as castration.

### **(3a) *A Clockwork Orange***

Prior to this extract from the film, the central protagonist Alex has attacked a woman with a large porcelain phallus. That the phallus is in his possession is significant because when he is attacked, temporarily blinded, it passes over to the rest of the gang in the shape of a milk bottle. Indeed, the phallic signification of power is no greater than when the milk bottle smashes into Alex's face, which marks the very onset of his blindness. In other words, the phallus is in Alex's possession when he is the sighted perpetrator of a brutal attack, a symbolic rape, but not when he becomes the blind victim of a comparable violation. The characterisation becomes manifestly binary, divided in accordance with empowered constructs of "the sighted" and disempowered constructs of "the blind". This contrast also resonates at the end of the extract, when the blinded Alex lies on the floor and the rest of the gang run from the scene.

### **(3b) *Under Milk Wood***

In this extract the phallic imagery is somewhat less explicit, but signifies a similar contrast between “the sighted” and “the blind”. The sighted Captain Cat is armed with one bottle in the fighting scene, and shares another with Rosie when they are in bed together. Subsequent to the onset of his blindness, however, there are no such phallic attributes. His hypersexual, sighted past becomes displaced in favour of an asexual, blind present. Again empowered constructs of “the sighted” and disempowered constructs of “the blind” are invoked, since the blinded Captain Cat is rendered passive but for the activity of remembering what he was when sighted.

Since the publication of Georges Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye* (1928) and Roland Barthes’s response to this erotic narrative, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’ (1963), it cannot be denied that the eye is sometimes ascribed phallic qualities. This fact has led me to coin the term ophthalmocentrism, which denotes a perspective that is dominated by the instrument of vision, one that advances notions of eyes that are sexy, innocent, hot, cold, hard, soft, kind, evil, honest, lying, windows to the soul and so



on. The phallic symbolism is ophthalmocentric in Under Milk Wood when the beautiful, sexual Rosie is represented by a close-up on her eyes, whereas the spent, asexualised Rosie is symbolically blind, with coins over her eyes, going into the darkness of the darkness forever.

## **Conclusion**

This brief post-disability reading reveals some of the ways in which visual impairment is represented in terms of asexuality and other forms of castration. In the research paper 'Castrating Depictions of Visual Impairment: The Literary Backdrop to Eugenics', which will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, I invoke the Freudian defence mechanism of reaction formation to argue that, defensive in their nature, assertions of asexuality conceal belief in the exact opposite, hypersexuality. After all, as is pointed out in Ruth Hubbard's 'Abortion and disability: Who should and who should not inhabit the world?' (1991), the Anglo-American science of eugenics was a response to the

notion that so-called genetically inferior people were reproducing faster than were superior people and would eventually displace them. Since the disruption of binary thought has been something of a theme in this presentation, not to mention the fact that Jacques Derrida refers to the castration figure of the blind in his book *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1990), it is also worth invoking the deconstructive process of *différance*. The term “the blind” belongs to a binary set, connoting as much about what it is not as about what it is. This means that the normalcy of “the sighted” depends on a notion of deviance in “the blind”, the strength of the former on the castration of the latter. Thus, the constructed division between depictions of people with impaired and unimpaired vision is ubiquitous, but resonant with eugenics.

### **Further Reading**

Barthes, Roland. ‘The Metaphor of the Eye.’ 1963. Georges Bataille. *Story of the Eye by Lord Auch*. London: Penguin, 1982. 119-27.

Derrida, Jacques. *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. 1990. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Hubbard, Ruth. 'Abortion and Disability: Who Should and Who Should Not Inhabit the World?' 1990. *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. 187-200.