

Symbiosis and Subjectivity: Literary Representations of Disability and Social Care

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Introduction

When considering the literary representation of disability and social care, I think it is helpful to draw on the philosophy of Albert Memmi, who has asserted that "there is in almost every dependency, even if it is apparently parasitic, some sort of symbiotic relationship" (66). In these terms it would be erroneous to represent the provision of care between non-disabled and disabled people as purely parasitic, a point on which many works of fiction have expanded.

Example 1

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* it is the eponymous protagonist who takes the role of provider when Rochester becomes maimed and blinded in a fire:

Mr Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near - that knit us so very close: for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. He saw nature - he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words, the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam - of the landscape before us; of the weather round us - and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye. Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go: of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad - because he claimed these services without painful shame or damping humiliation. He loved me so truly that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance; he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes.

There are numerous services that Rochester requires of Jane, but it should be noted that she finds the execution of these services pleasurable in a 'most full, most exquisite' way. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that this relationship is more beneficial for Jane than it is for Rochester, because her conception of dependency does not accommodate his subjectivity. Symbiosis results from a relationship in which the dependant is a provider and the provider a dependant, but here Jane does not recognise Rochester as a provider. The dependency is only reciprocal in so far as Jane receives pleasure and power in the act of giving, meaning that Rochester is effectively removed from the equation.

Example 2

In Henry Green's *Blindness*, John Haye is blinded when a stone smashes the window of the train in which he is travelling, a consequence being that his childhood nanny becomes his care-provider:

"What is there for tea, Nan?"

"Well, I thought you might like buttered toast and bread and butter, you always was that fond of at nursery teas, and the Easter cake. . ."

"I'll break the rules and have a bit of that first, Nan, please."

She cuts a slice and begins to feed him bit by bit, at intervals putting the teacup into his hands. She loves doing it. For years she has watched him getting more and more independent, and now she is feeding him again. It is nice. [. . .]

"Would you like a sip of tea again, Master John?"

"Thanks, and some buttered toast."

"I do so love feeding ye, Master John, like I used to with the bottle. I remember. . ."

Again I would argue that the provider is gaining more than the dependant here. Because Nanny uses the verb 'love' to express just how 'nice' she finds this experience, it is clear that she is benefiting profoundly. John, on the contrary, regresses to what psychoanalysts call the oral phase of development, as buttered toast, bread and butter, Easter cake and tea substitute the bottle, which is in itself a substitute for the breast. The full effect of this dependency becomes explicit when the reader is informed of the 'years' that Nanny has 'watched' John 'getting more and more independent', only to be reduced to an infantile state in which 'she is feeding him again'.

Example 3

In D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lady Chatterley acts as care-provider when her husband, Sir Clifford, is paralysed as the result of a war injury, but the role is ultimately passed on to Mrs. Bolton, as is illustrated in the following extract:

When he rang, after a time, she would appear at once. And then he would say:

`I think I'd rather you shaved me this morning.'

Her heart gave a little thrill, and she replied with extra softness:

`Very good, Sir Clifford'

She was very deft, with a soft, lingering touch, a little slow. At first he had resented the infinitely soft touch of her fingers on his face. But now he liked it, with a growing voluptuousness. He let her shave him nearly every day: her face near his, her eyes so very concentrated, watching that she did it right. And gradually her fingertips knew his cheeks and lips, his jaw and chin; and throat perfectly. He was well-fed and well-liking, his face and throat were handsome enough and he was a gentleman.

She was handsome too, pale, her face rather long and absolutely still, her eyes bright, but revealing nothing. Gradually, with infinite softness, almost with love, she was getting him by the throat, and he was yielding to her.

She now did almost everything for him, and he felt more at home with-her, less ashamed of accepting her menial offices, than with Connie. She liked handling him. She loved having his body in her charge, absolutely, to the last menial offices.

One of the ways in which this example differs from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Henry Green's *Blindness* is that the dependency is irrefutably symbiotic. The relationship is mutually beneficial for Mrs. Bolton and Sir Clifford, the apparent provider and apparent dependant.

Example 4

In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Hamm is blind and lacks the use of his legs, while Clov, the apparent provider, has a stiff leg and is losing his sight. When Hamm decides he would be better off in bed he whistles for help and Clov immediately appears:

HAMM: Get me ready, I'm going to bed.

CLOV: I've just got you up.

HAMM: And what of it?

CLOV: I can't be getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes, I have things to do.

The key point that I would like to make about this play is that although it contains a dramatic performance of parasitic dependency throughout, it ends with an explicit recognition of symbiosis:

CLOV: This is what we call making an exit.

HAMM: I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your services.

CLOV: (turning, sharply). Ah pardon, it's I am obliged to you.

HAMM: It's we are obliged to each other.

The role of provider is not an easy one in the play, a representation that has been substantiated by the testimony of many carers, but the point to note is that the relationship is nonetheless recognised as symbiotic. The subjectivity of neither the apparent provider nor the apparent dependant is displaced or in any way doubted.

Conclusion

It is important, of course, to recognise the value of social care, and thus the subjectivity of care-providers, but not at the expense of the subjectivity of the disabled dependants. While there is a received understanding that disabled people are dependant on non-disabled people, the reverse is frequently unacknowledged but also true, as has been portrayed in many works of fiction that blur the distinction between non-disabled care-provider and disabled dependant.

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