The Starfish Paradigm: Impairment, Disability, and characterisation in Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh”

DAVID BOLT

Centre for Culture & Disability Studies, Faculty of Education, Liverpool Hope University

[This is the penultimate draft of an article that appeared in Midwest Quarterly [2010] 52.1, pp. 11-30.)

Introduction

It is a curious fact that some species of starfish can regrow their damaged or lost limbs. In a few cases the limbs contain vital organs, meaning that a whole starfish can regenerate from a single limb. It is also a curious fact that, in the cultural imagination, a person’s impairment tends to be comparably envisaged as an interim step in a narrative that strides toward unimpairment for its very resolution. Of course there are many “marked bodies” in culture, owing to widespread prejudicial attitudes about gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, but what makes disability distinct, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have pointed out, is “its unambiguous ability to impact every other identity category at any time” (x). That is to say, no matter how marked or unmarked someone’s body may be in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, the prospect of impairment is essentially inescapable and becomes greater with every passing day. Despite this undeniably universal relevance, however, impairment tends to be thought of in dramatic but purely transient terms. In order to “be disabled,” as Mitchell and Snyder have argued, “one must narrate one's disability for others in sweeping strokes or hushed private tones. And this narration must inevitably show how we conquer our disabilities or how they eventually conquer us” (xii). The ironic consequence is that the representation of impairment becomes an engagement in “an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of ‘recognizable’ human experiences” (5). Accordingly, many representations follow what I designate the starfish paradigm, suggesting that the dreams and aspirations of someone who has an impairment rest on some form of cure, as though unimpairment were a necessary condition of success.

In illustrating this assertion, the hunch on which the article expands is that characterisation is an essential aspect of fiction but frequently deficient in relation to disability. Although literary works may be judged in part by the complexity of their characters, when it comes to the representation of someone with a biological impairment simplicity is often accepted without comment. For example, Bobbie Ann Mason’s first book
Shiloh and Other Stories, was the winner of the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 1983, as well as a finalist for the National Book Critics Award, the American Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. More specifically, the title work of the collection, “Shiloh,” was selected for Best American Short Stories of 1981. Portraying a troubled working-class couple, the Moffitts, who are unaccustomed to spending lengthy periods of time together until the husband Leroy’s job as a truck driver ends in a road accident, one of the many irrefutable strengths of this story is in the characterisation of the wife Norma Jean, who, according to Tina Bucher, rebels against “typically feminine roles” (par. 2). But if the story’s depictions of femininity and disability are juxtaposed, the latter may be found wanting. In a qualitative sense, the progressive representation of femininity can seem somewhat let down by the manifestly regressive representation of disability, given the difference between the complex character of Norma Jean and the multiply diminished and thus relatively simple character of Leroy.

Challenging the notion that being biologically female is a sufficient condition of femininity, the characterisation of Norma Jean is grounded in feminist epistemology. After all, initiated in part by Simone de Beauvoir’s much-quoted assertion that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301) and the psychological research of Robert Stoller, the distinction between sex and gender was posited in the decade before Mason’s publication by second wave feminists such as Ann Oakley and Sue Sharpe. The contention was, in brief, that although sex is a biological matter, gender can be better understood in social, psychological, and cultural terms. The characterisation of Norma Jean may even be said to illustrate Judith Butler’s radical work on performativity, which is grounded in Speech Act theory and argues that gender cannot exist before or beyond the discourse by which it is named, that it is ascribed as the result of a process that begins when a baby is first referred to as a boy or a girl. Mason engages with this issue by invoking a nominal link with Marilyn Monroe, whose real name was Norma Jean Baker, but employing typically masculine characteristics to disrupt any further evocations of the feminine icon. That Leroy’s name means ‘the king’ in French is also relevant in this respect because, as is suggested when he opens a “king-sized bottle of beer,” but divides it carefully, and hands a glass to Norma Jean (362), far from being a patriarch, he is subservient in relation to the other characters.

If, however, Leroy’s relatively diminished characterisation is considered with reference to the radical model of disability, a more complex mode of representation becomes apparent. The radical model posits a conceptual distinction between impairment and disability that parallels the feminist distinction between sex and gender. It is similar, as has been pointed out by Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, because it regards disability as “socially created, or constructed on top of impairment, and places the explanation of its changing character in the social and economic structure and culture of the society in which it is found” (3). In these terms, a person may be impaired for many reasons, but it is only by society that he or she is disabled. For example, the inability to walk is an impairment, but the inability to enter a building because the entrance is at the top of a flight of steps is a disability. In other words, as Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer have pointed out, the radical social model challenges the idea that disability is an “inescapable biological destiny” (12); it draws the distinction between biological impairment and social disability that is adopted throughout this article.

Particularly instrumental in the late-twentieth-century British disability movement, the radical social model was developed by activists and academics, including the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the 1970s, Vic Finkelstein in the 1980s, and Mike Oliver in the 1990s. Comparable American models were emerging at the time, and
mor recently, following the critical work of Jenny Morris, Liz Crow, Sally French, Tom Shakespeare, and Shelley Tremain among others, the American disability studies pioneer Lennard Davis coined the term *dismodernism* to describe a further development of the social model and its postmodern context. As the most radical of the models that were available at the time of Mason’s publication, though, it is the British version to which this article refers, in accordance with Finkelstein’s assertion that a “good model can enable us to see something which we do not understand because in the model it can be seen from different viewpoints (not available to us in reality) and it is this multi-dimensioned replica of reality that can trigger insights which we might not otherwise develop” (2). That is to say, the article’s reference to the radical social model triggers new insights into the representation of disability in “Shiloh,” some of which may be relevant to the representation of disability in general.

The central proposition is that for much of the story Leroy resists the starfish mentality, the idea that biological unimpairment is a necessary condition of aspiration, because he begins, or at least endeavours, to put his building plan into action before recovering from his injury. He remembers being biologically unimpaired in the past and looks forward to being so again in the future, but also values the period of his life in which he is biologically impaired and officially classed as disabled. For this reason the article later draws a comparison with a couple of contemporary and mythical figures who do not follow the starfish paradigm—namely, Dr. Gregory House and Hephaestus. The point that the radical social model of disability triggers in this reading is that disabling barriers are erected by Leroy’s counterparts, his community, the agents of an ableist society. Thus, though not contending Albert Wilhelm’s point that Mason portrays personal crises that are not only intensified but also incited by radical changes in social relationships, I stress that biological impairment is not portrayed as a sufficient preliminary of these changes.

“Is this one of those women's lib things?”

There is a stark contrast between the bold opening image of “Shiloh” in which Norma Jean stands with her legs apart, lifting weights to build her pectorals, and a subsequent image of weakness in which she sits on a kitchen chair “with her feet up and her arms wrapped around her knees” (362). When analysing this contrast we may be reminded of E. M. Forster’s assertion that a flat character, in its purest form, is based on a single idea or quality, the increased number of which introduces a curve toward round characterisation (135). The roundness of Norma Jean’s character is suggested by the way in which she initially reminds Leroy of Wonder Woman, but later looks “small and helpless” (362), a combination of strength and weakness that is embodied when she tells him to “Feel this arm,” adding that it is “not as hard as the other one” (355). Corporeally, then, she is half hard, half soft; sometimes strong, sometimes weak. What is more, the way in which she stands strong with her legs apart and sits holding her knees together may be said to evoke a mixture of sexual defiance and vulnerability.

But more than being implied by her physicality, the roundness of Norma Jean’s character becomes demonstrable in her capacity for a mixture of social roles that are typically feminine and typically masculine. The typically feminine aspect of this dyad is evident in the domestic sphere as she makes a “potato and mushroom-soup casserole, with grated-cheese topping” (360), cooks “fried chicken, picnic ham, chocolate pie” (360), “runs the vacuum” (361), “comes in with groceries” (364), and puts “away boxes and cans” (364). The typically masculine aspect is illustrated by the way in which she goes out to work at the Rexall
drugstore, leaving Leroy “home alone” with the breakfast dishes to wash and put away (360). Moreover, it is Norma Jean who, in a typically paternal fashion, insists on imparting the “amazing amount of information” that she has acquired at work (356), “every tune” in the sixties songbook (357), her knowledge of composition (362), the correct pronunciation of dachshund (362), and numerous facts—Leroy’s name means “the king,” Norma Jean was Marilyn Monroe’s real name, “Norma comes from the Normans, the Normans were invaders, and so on (364). Indeed, when Norma Jean and Leroy travel to Shiloh, although it is she who packs “a picnic cooler, with pimiento sandwiches, soft drinks, and Yodels” (365), it is also she who drives. This detail is relevant because, even a decade on from Mason’s publication, Bucher asserted without fear of contradiction that anyone who had “driven down the road passing carfuls of couples, with the men in the front and women in the back,” knew that it was “still considered appropriate for the man to drive—to assume the position of control” (par. 3).

That is not to say that Norma Jean and Leroy trade roles completely. Though he may be said to take on a typically feminine role, she does not simply take on a typically masculine role. Rather, as is suggested in the opening juxtaposition (created by the typically masculine activity of weight-training and the nominal invocation of Marilyn Monroe), Norma Jean blurs the distinction between the typical roles by excelling in them both. In this respect, more than being round in the Forsterian sense, the character illustrates Naomi Wolf’s new feminism, which regards women as powerful agents of change, with numerous resources at their disposal. All in all, then, the boldness, the subtleties, the sheer complexity of Norma Jean’s character warrant much in the way of feminist praise (see, for example, Morphew), and hermeneutic discussion in general (see, for example, Arnold).

The main point of interest here, however, is the way in which Norma Jean’s complex characterisation relates to Leroy’s biological impairment and social disability. Her empowerment results from his biological impairment in so far as she builds her body with equipment that has been acquired for his rehabilitation, an exercise in self-improvement that prompts her enrolment on bodybuilding, cookery, and composition courses, yet far from being appreciative, her attitude toward biological impairment is quite dismissive and arguably perpetuates his social disability. It may even be said that averseness to his biological impairment is implicit in her ostentatious bodybuilding regime, an aspect of the building motif that at the very least reveals a preoccupation with corporeality.

“Leroy has been collecting temporary disability”

With echoes of the opening image of the physically enhanced Norma Jean, Leroy is introduced as a truckdriver who has injured his left leg in a highway accident and thus has a steel pin in his hip. It is suggested that he will not return to his work, because even if the therapy prepares him physically, the accident has left him afraid to drive any more long hauls. We are also informed at the outset that Leroy has been collecting “temporary disability” (355), a detail that has a duel function in the exposition, revealing both that his injury is officially classed as a disability and that his income is unearned. The fact that this state of affairs is defined as temporary does not go unexamined here, but the first detail to consider is the implication that someone with a biological impairment will necessarily be unemployed. It cannot be denied that at the time of Mason’s publication people with impairments were underrepresented in the workplace, because unemployment rates may “vary over time and between countries,” as has been pointed out by Barnes and Mercer, but are “routinely higher than the national average amongst adults with impairments” (47). Indeed, even a couple of
decades on from Mason’s publication, Davis could go so far as to assert that in the United States “only one-third of people with disabilities” were “employed, versus upward of 70 percent of ‘normal’ workers” (28). But the point to note is that, according to insights gained from the radical social model of disability, the solution to the problem resides in society, that unemployment in people with biological impairments was, and still is, frequently the result of disabling attitudes and assumptions about access to premises, equipment, information and so on.

The unemployment problem is perpetuated by the commonly held misconception that people who have biological impairments are workshy, a gross misrepresentation that is implicitly challenged in “Shiloh.” At the start of the story Leroy has been home in Kentucky for three months and his leg is “almost healed,” but although he is “not sure what to do next,” he knows he “does not want to drive any more long hauls” (355). Norma Jean suggests that he could truck calves to slaughter for somebody, pointing out that he “wouldn't have to drive any big old truck for that,” but the reluctant Leroy avoids the issue by saying, “I'm going to build you this house” (359). Norma Jean persists in a parental, and thus infantilising fashion, “You have to find a job,” going so far as to make a list of what she regards as the employment possibilities for Leroy: “You could get a job as a guard at Union Carbide, where they'd let you set on a stool. You could get on at the lumberyard. You could do a little carpenter work, if you want to build so bad” (359). Leroy rejects these suggestions on the grounds that he is unable to stand for long periods of time, which Norma Jean dismisses as an excuse by pointing out that her own work involves standing all day behind a cosmetics counter. Her argument puts them both on a similar footing, implying that she does not recognise his biological impairment, that his legs are no weaker than hers. The contradiction of this stance is betrayed when she raises her knees one at a time as she talks and then does goose steps around the kitchen, a display of lower-body strength that is bolstered by the narrator’s observation that she is wearing two-pound ankle weights. This unappreciative attitude toward impairment casts doubt over Norma Jean’s extensive vocational rehabilitation advice and the way in which the onus of the unemployment problem is placed on Leroy.

Implicit in the very notion of vocational rehabilitation is the socially disabling fallacy that people with biological impairments are generally unemployable, being more appropriately engaged in activities such as basket-weaving than gainful employment. Hence, Leroy initially occupies himself with his needlepoint, craft kits, building a miniature log cabin from notched Popsicle sticks, progressing to string art, a macrame owl kit, a snap-together B-17 Flying Fortress and a lamp in the shape of a model truck. Though it is less frequently appreciated that people with biological impairments may engage with such activities precisely because there are few employment opportunities in an ableist society, Mason’s narrator points out that for Leroy the kits were initially “diversions, something to kill time, but now he is thinking about building a full-scale log house” (355). The implication is that when Leroy is biologically impaired his time is deemed null and void, but for the purpose of this article it should be stressed that his leg is not fully heeled when he begins making plans. He seems set to follow in the footsteps of a minority of biologically impaired characters who do not abide by the starfish paradigm, whose aspirations are not predicated on biological unimpairment.

A couple of contemporary and mythical figures who do not follow the starfish paradigm, Dr. Gregory House and Hephaestus, are juxtaposed in a study by Nicole Markotić. The eponymous protagonist of the popular television drama House, is a medical genius who suffers chronic pain from the infarcted muscles in his thigh and walks with a cane. In one episode, “Cane and Able” (2006), he alludes to his aspirations and biological impairment together by asserting, “God doesn't have a limp.” The comment is, as Markotić points out, in response to Dr. Wilson’s endeavour to save House from the Icarian fate of metaphorically flying too close to the sun: “House’s retort achieves its aim: to chastise his friend for ever
thinking that House forgets the constant reminder of his all-too-human physical attribute (that is, his limp) and, of course, to allow him to continue with whatever ‘god-complex’-invasive-doctor-procedure he wishes to perform” (13). The Icarus myth warned against superhuman aspirations to fly, to achieve eternal life, and to reach Valhalla, but, as Markotić puts it, bodily perfection was not part of the mythic lesson: “Had the House writers known their Greek mythology a bit better (or were they willing to have any one of the ‘lesser’ characters win the quip-wars for which House is famous), they could well have had Dr. Wilson cleverly retort: ‘God doesn’t limp? Hephaestus limped. Haphaestus limped all over the Volcano he inhabited, where he forged a magnificent walking staff’” (18). While Leroy’s aspirations are far from Icarian, the figure of Hephaestus provides a useful counterpoint to the starfish paradigm because he is known as a master craftsman.

But unlike his ancient predecessor Hephaestus and his twenty-first-century successor House, Leroy takes his aspirational venture no further than the planning stage, ultimately being defeated by a barrage of rejection that I illustrate later, which is notable because the building of a log cabin would contribute to society in a way that the other kits simply do not. Moreover, the other kits are typically associated with boys, whereas the building of a log cabin is typically thought of as man’s work, meaning that the rejection of Leroy’s craftsmanly venture can be interpreted as his infantilisation and, by extension, emasculation.

That Leroy’s emasculation and unemployment status are interrelated is expressed figuratively when his phallic rig is likened to a “huge piece of furniture gathering dust in the backyard” and will soon be an “antique” (362), because there is a correlation between the implied social and sexual uselessness. In fact, demoralisation in respect of the masculine role is considered alongside a loss of the capacity for erotic pleasure in Charles Rycroft’s definition of the psychoanalytic term castration. Furthermore, since classical times, according to Peter Hays, limping heroes in Western literature have been symbolic of infertility. In response to the assertion that “God doesn’t have a limp,” then, Markotić was right to invoke the figure of Hephaestus, but we should not forget that he was considered so ugly in his impairment that Aphrodite’s adultery was rendered justifiable. Overtones of this pejorative aspect of the Hephaestus myth can be detected when Leroy broaches the topic of relationships with Norma Jean, who does not speak but on her organ “begins playing ‘Who’ll Be the Next in Line?’” (361). This “choice of songs functions as a speech act that completes her emasculation” of Leroy, as Greg Bentley’s extensive psychoanalytic reading points out, because she is “already subconsciously searching for his replacement” (154). Norma Jean overtly ignores but covertly insults Leroy, a complex form of the discursive castration to which he becomes accustomed, as is illustrated when she rejects the very idea that they might have a romantic relationship, referring to the pending Shiloh trip thus: “Who’s going on a honeymoon, for Christ’s sake?” (364). More significantly, she cannot bear to look when she is in bed with him: “She wants the lights turned out. Even then, he is sure she closes her eyes” (360). This example is particularly notable in psychoanalytic terms because it resonates with the myth favoured by Freud—namely, the ancient story of Oedipus, the mythical king who unknowingly broke the incest taboo by having sexual intercourse with his mother and, on realising what he had done, gouged out his eyes. That is to say, based on the erroneous but nonetheless ubiquitous idea that seeing and knowing are one and the same, Norma Jean closes her eyes to Leroy, like Oedipus to Jocasta, as though a sexual taboo is being broken in the physical act of love with a man who is biologically impaired.

Of course this disavowal of desire can be explained in many ways, one of which pertains to the devastating loss of baby Randy, as is suggested by the colloquial meaning of his name—the implication being that Norma Jean’s randiness died with Randy, her interest in the physical act of love with its outcome. Bentley has cited Randy’s death as the origin of Leroy’s symbolic castration, referring to the way in which he “remembers Norma Jean
standing catatonically beside him in the hospital and himself thinking: Who is this strange
girl? He had forgotten who she was” (358). But it may be argued that the episode is more
illustrative of Norma Jean’s symbolic castration than Leroy’s. While it cannot be denied that
both characters are potentially psychosocially castrated by the death of their son in so far as
their parental status diminishes, the change in Norma Jean is immediate—the very moment she
ceases to be a mother to Randy she becomes a stranger to Leroy.

For all that, the significance of Leroy’s leg injury cannot be ignored. Its bearing on his
symbolic castration is implied when Norma Jean says, “In some ways, a woman prefers a man
who wanders” (366). Because the verb wander can denote walking and philandering alike, the
implication is that for her Leroy is diminished in both respects. Accordingly, her attitude
toward him changes subsequent to the onset of his impairment. Before the accident, she stays
in bed with him, watching television and playing cards, as opposed to leaving him “home
alone much of the time” with a “cooling place in the bed” (360), a detail that echoes Athena’s
disappearance from the bed in which Hephaestus had made unwanted advances. Regarding
their sexual relationship, then, the accident is more detrimental than the baby’s death, because
Norma Jean’s symbolic castration passes from Leroy’s mind, as is illustrated when he
endeavours to become “reacquainted” (361), but his symbolic castration has made a profound
impression on her. In other words, the social role of motherhood is less significant to Leroy’s
conception of femininity than non-disability to Norma Jean’s conception of masculinity. She
may hold mixed feelings about the significance of his biological impairment, but there is less
doubt about her emasculating attitude toward his social disability as it becomes manifest in
the form of unemployment.

“I don't want to live in any log cabin”

Leroy’s emasculation worsens, and is worsened by, the reduced value of his knowledge and
aspirations, because nobody but he is interested in his thoughts on building a log cabin, the
idea in which he invests much of his time and masculine identity. Whereas the Homeric
Hephaestus was allowed back into Olympus when the gods became aware of his skills, Leroy
faces a barrage of rejection. His enthusiasm is stifled by three characters, the most significant
of whom is Norma Jean, as is illustrated by her consistently negative responses to the idea:
“They won't let you build a log cabin in any of the new subdivisions” (356); “Like heck you
are” (359); “I don't want to live in any log cabin” (359); and “Don't start in on that again”
(361). The discursive castration is even more effective when she finds the proposition
unworthy of any answer at all (360). With distant echoes of the myth that Athena was not
only Hephaestus’s unwilling bedfellow but also the goddess of wisdom, the epistemological
contrast that underpins the relationship is illustrated when Norma Jean sits at the table
“writing” and “concentrating” on her outlines, while Leroy merely “plays” with his log house
plans (363). She is taking an adult-education course in composition, the very sound of which
intimidates him: “I never was any good in English” (363). This sense of epistemological
intimidation is sustained when Norma Jean drives them both to Shiloh and Leroy’s status is
reduced to that of a boring hitchhiker: “He tries some conversation, but she answers him in
monosyllables” (365). The discursive castration leaves him feeling awkward, “like a boy on a
date with an older girl” (365), the implication being that subsequent to his injury, Leroy
begins to regard his thoughts as juvenile, epistemologically inferior to those of Norma Jean.

The second character to belittle Leroy is Stevie Hamilton, a teenager who sells
marijuana and was born about the same time as Randy. Stevie’s father is a prominent doctor
and was two years ahead of Leroy in high school. Despite this childhood link and the
chronological consequence that the two adults are in their mid thirties, it is not the doctor but
Stevie with whom Leroy finds himself associating:

‘Where do you get this stuff?’ asks Leroy. ‘From your pappy?’
‘That’s for me to know and you to find out,’ Stevie says. He is slit-eyed and skinny.
‘What else you got?’
‘What you interested in?’
‘Nothing special. Just wondered.’ (357)

Leroy and Stevie trade roles in so far as the former acts like a teenager and the latter like an adult. The infantile term *pappy* is indicative of the way in which Leroy “tries discursively to emphasize their age difference and his chronological superiority,” as Bentley has pointed out, but Stevie’s response “establishes his power and authority,” keeping “Leroy ignorant, a form of intellectual castration” (149-50). The term may also be interpreted as an early sign of Leroy’s defeat, his ultimate internalisation of the infantilising discourse by which he is repeatedly defined. Either way the epistemological diminishment continues when Leroy leans back against his car and tries to impress Stevie by saying, “I’m aiming to build me a log house, soon as I get time. My wife, though, I don’t think she likes the idea” (357). Stevie makes no effort to hide his apathy when he interrupts Leroy by saying, “Well, let me know when you want me again” (357). Like Norma Jean, he recognises no value in Leroy’s discourse or its epistemological basis.

The third character who ridicules Leroy’s interests is Norma Jean’s mother, Mabel Beasley, whose attitude is ironically misogynistic, eliciting a response that can be interpreted as another sign of his internalisation of the emasculating, infantilising discourse:

‘What’s that thing?’ Mabel says to Leroy in a loud voice, pointing to a tangle of yarn on a piece of canvas.
Leroy holds it up for Mabel to see. ‘It's my needlepoint,’ he explains. ‘This is a Star Trek pillow cover.’
‘That's what a woman would do,’ says Mabel. ‘Great day in the morning!’
‘All the big football players on TV do it,’ he says. (358)

Mabel’s references to “that thing” and “what a woman would do” are obviously meant to be disparaging and Leroy’s references to Star Trek and “big football players” do little to assert his manliness. At this point he turns to his idea about building a log cabin, endeavouring to resist the discursive castration and the pressure to internalise his infantilisation, but Mabel is neither impressed nor interested. Indeed, in a subsequent episode, Leroy’s epistemological diminishment is epitomised when he looks at the plans for his log house at the kitchen table, but Mabel recognises absolutely no value in the preoccupation, carelessly setting her coffee cup on a blueprint (361-362). Mabel has been described by Bentley as the “most emasculating figure in Leroy’s life,” and this coffee cup episode as her “most serious annihilation” of his “sense of self and manhood” (150-51). The thinking is that because Leroy invests so much of himself in the idea of building a log cabin, it is he whom Mabel is effectively using as a place mat, his masculine identity over which she is asserting her own patriarchal dominance.

Leroy returns again and again to the idea of building a log house, invoking it as his only defence against discursive emasculation. For that reason, Bentley has argued that because the paradigms of conventional male identity disintegrate, the “ephemeral log house stands in as the ‘solid’ embodiment of Leroy’s lost masculinity and his absent subjectivity” (158). Despite the depth of Bentley’s psychoanalytic study, however, no direct reference is made to disability. This omission is perplexing not only because Mason’s narrator refers to disability early in the story, but also because, according to insights gained from the radical social model of disability, people with impairments are effectively castrated by society, a contention that is quite pertinent to the emasculation hypothesis on which Bentley expands.

To ignore the story’s reference to disability is to miss the salient point that Leroy is only meant to be disabled temporarily, a detail that implicitly invokes his non-disabled status.
in the past and future. His past is illustrated by the memories of gainful employment and a 
full, loving relationship with Norma Jean, but his future and present are less distinct in terms 
of disability. In the present, his characterisation does not accord, at least initially, with the 
starfish paradigm, because his aspirations are manifest in the idea of building a log house. But 
illustrating what Linda Adams Barnes means by “freaks” who are “forced to conform to 
untraditional lifestyles” (141), as well as David Mitchell’s allusion to de Beauvoir, “one is not 
born a freak; one is made one” (ix), Leroy gradually internalises the socially disabling attitudes 
toward biological impairment. His resultant feelings of inadequacy become manifest in the 
skills of not only building but also driving. He is depressed by the way in which the houses of 
the new subdivisions all look “grand and complicated” in relation to the log house that he 
wants to build for Norma Jean (360). And while he is happy practicing with a set of Lincoln 
Logs, under what Bentley has called “the illusion that stacking miniature logs from a model 
“kit” will prepare him for building an actual house that will require skill at and knowledge of 
carpentry, plumbing, and electricity—among many, many other things” (156), Leroy is scared 
by the “thought of getting a truckload of notched, numbered logs” (363). This anxiety 
resonates with his fear of driving long hauls, the relationship between a log house and the 
model with the relationship between the rig and the car that he drives after his accident. His 
injured leg “stretches out comfortably,” but power steering and an automatic shift make a car 
feel “so small and inconsequential that his body is hardly involved in the driving process” 
(360). Indeed, he drives his car without due care precisely because of its size in relation to his 
rig: “Once or twice he has almost hit something, but even the prospect of an accident seems 
minor in a car” (360). The rig and the log house become emblematic of his non-disabled 
status in the past and supposed future, the car and building kits of his disabled status in the 
present, and the dimensional distinction between the two conditions evokes the sense of an 
tonological diminishment, as though his very existence is scaled down when he is biologically 
impared.

When Leroy’s truck is displaced in favour of a car, there is a reduction in terms of not 
only size but also pace, an allusion to which is made when the narrator says, “Leroy used to 
take speed on the road. Now he has to go slowly” (357). More than informing us of an 
existential distinction between the man Leroy was before his accident and the one he 
subsequently becomes, the allusion to pace foreshadows the drama of the closing scene. After 
the picnic in Shiloh is brought to an abrupt end by Norma Jean’s announcement that she is 
leaving him, he finally loses the aspiration that has thus far rendered his characterisation 
beyond the starfish paradigm. That is to say, he gives up on the idea of building a log house, 
deciding to “wad the blueprints into tight balls and fling them into the lake” (367). He closes 
his eyes and concludes that the plan was empty, clumsy, and crazy, the “dumbest idea he 
could have had” (366). When he opens his eyes Norma Jean is walking through the cemetery. 
He gets up to follow her, but his “good leg is asleep and his bad leg still hurts him” (367). The 
inadequacy of the way in which he “tries to hobble toward her” is accentuated by the fact that 
Norma Jean is “far away, walking rapidly toward the bluff by the river,” as well as by the 
children who “run past him, screaming noisily” (367). Thus, having resisted infantilisation 
throughout the story, he is symbolically upstaged by a group of children in the closing scene. 
This dramatic climax illustrates an aspect of what Mitchell and Snyder have designated 
narrative prosthesis, the use of disability as a “crutch” on which a narrative leans for its 
“representational power” (17). After all, if not as the reason Norma Jean apparently commits 
suicide, Leroy’s disability must be recognised as the reason she is not stopped. The key point 
for us to note, though, is that the disability is not deemed an inescapable biological destiny, 
given that Leroy’s impairment is effectively being used against him, that in rushing away 
Norma Jean is seen to deliberately place him at a disadvantage.
Conclusion

Norma Jean is typically feminine in that she cooks, cleans, shops and generally keeps the home in order, but her character is round in the Forsterian sense because she also lifts weights, goes out to work, drives, studies, reads nonfiction and so on. Leroy’s character is relatively flat, because he is typically disabled in so far as he is infantilised and emasculated, ascribed a diminished capacity for employment, sexuality, epistemology, and ontology. When juxtaposed in this manner, as demonstrated, the character of Leroy emerges as a foil for that of Norma Jean. Her empowered femininity appears pronounced in relation to his disempowered masculinity, thereby illustrating that flat characters are by no means superfluous. It must be acknowledged, here, that being only relatively flat Leroy’s character does not exemplify Forster’s meaning of the word, and in any case, as Edwin Muir has pointed out, flat characters always contain more than one factor: by definition, they have two sides—namely, the evident and the hidden (134). But the way in which the characterisation of Norma Jean rests on that of Leroy is notable because it resonates with the significance of the limp in the dramatic climax, further illustrating Mitchell and Snyder’s point that disability is a narrative device on which many writers depend—and, by extension, the concept of narrative prosthesis that provides a theoretical basis for the starfish paradigm.

What the radical social model brings to the reading is that it is not enough to argue that Norma Jean’s character is more complex than Leroy’s, or even that Mason’s representation of femininity is more progressive than that of disability, because this would be to decontextualise the characters, much as the individual model of disability socially decontextualises people who are biologically impaired. Impairment, as emphasised at the start of the article, has a truly universal relevance. Many people have personal experience; most people know someone who has an impairment; and anyone can become impaired at any time—all it takes, as Davis has put it, is “the swerve of a car, the impact of a football tackle, or the tick of the clock to make this transformation” (5). Thereafter, as Mitchell and Snyder have said, it is commonly believed that disability must either conquer or be conquered, a belief that becomes apparent in “Shiloh.” Although like Hephaestus Leroy initially aspires to build irrespective of his biological impairment, he never manages to put his craftsmanly plans into action. He finally gives up on the log house in which all hopes for the future have been invested. Indeed, his characterisation accords with the starfish paradigm in so far as he loses his job, his sexual attractiveness, the respect of his counterparts, his longing to build, and his wife Norma Jean, all within months of his accident, the implication being that if his leg had healed, if his impairment had been temporary, his aspirations may have been achieved. However, according to the radical social model, the critical point is that biological impairment need not result in social disability. Ironically, then, Leroy becomes disabled as a result of various attitudes toward impairment, the most universally relevant of all identity categories, and not as a result of the accident itself.

Bibliography


