

Summer 2017

# “There Was That in Her Face and Form Which Made Him Loathe the Sight of Her”: Disfiguration and Deformity of Female Characters in 19th Century American Women’s Literature

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“THERE WAS THAT IN HER FACE AND FORM WHICH MADE HIM LOATHE THE  
SIGHT OF HER”: DISFIGURATION AND DEFORMITY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN  
19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN’S LITERATURE

by

KELSI CUNNINGHAM

(Under the Direction of Caren Town)

ABSTRACT

Rebecca Harding Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Wilkins Freeman challenge the way that society treats and views the disabled and deformed. Through different representations of the disabled characters, the three short stories by these authors reveal the realities that women faced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to rigid beauty standards and expectations. The authors in this study address the marginalized position of the disabled characters and show how society’s attempts to “normalize” the women confine them to a fixed identity. Analyzing the texts in relation to disability studies and the authors’ perceived effectiveness of social charity will show how 19<sup>th</sup>-century society’s fixation on the female appearance and suppressed disabled-women’s identities and autonomy.

INDEX WORDS: Davis, Rebecca Harding; Jewett, Sarah Orne; Freeman, Mary Wilkins; Disability; 19<sup>th</sup> Century; Charity; Conformity; Short Stories; American Literature; Angel in the House; Realism; Social Justice; Disability Studies

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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Electronic Version Approved:  
July 2017

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee: Dr. David Dudley, Dr. Olivia Carr Edenfield, and Dr. Caren Town. I know that without your patience, encouragement, feedback, and direction this would not be possible. I would also like to express my admiration for my parents, Joy and Kristy Cunningham, for without their love and support I would not be in the position I am today.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Female Disability in Historical Context

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, The United States was transformed by the epic national battle over slavery and enfranchisement, industrial growth, immigration, changing class structures, increasing urbanization, and expanding public education. While every American citizen experienced the effects of the rapid changes, women, in particular, confronted unique issues and circumstances. Rather than the home being regarded as a self-contained unit, where everyone played an equal part to ensure the growth and stability of the family, women began to be viewed as a fixed figure there. While the home has always been an important foundation for women's identities and the family unit as whole, the late-19<sup>th</sup> century inaugurated a wholly different approach to the home and how it is culturally situated.

During the Colonial Period, women worked both inside and outside of the home, which Gerda Lerner addresses in her essay "The Lady and the Mill Girl":

The vast majority of women worked in their homes, where their labor produced most articles needed for the family. The entire colonial production of cloth and clothing and partially that of shoes was in the hands of women. In addition to these occupations, women were found in many different kinds of employment, ... butchers, silversmiths, gunsmiths, upholsters, ... [and they even] ran mills, plantations, tan yards, shipyards, and every kind of shop. (6)

Although the social and economic system defined women's positions in subordinate relation to the men in their family, both genders worked in a world that was not rigid in its definition of the specific places for women and men. In Colonial society, "women acquired their skills the same way as did the men, through apprenticeship training, frequently within their own families"



(Lener 6). Since the industry of the Colonial period was more focused on family farms and based in rural communities, the public sphere, for the most part, *was* the private sphere. During this time, women experienced relative social freedom to conduct business and work freely in their men's absence.

During the Colonial farm economy, which quickly began to dissipate with late-19<sup>th</sup>-century industrialization, women (at least white women) experienced a life with much more economic and social equality than what became standard afterwards. With tension between the States, a rise in immigration, and the move to a market economy, the separation between men and women, as well as upper and lower classes, widened over time. Additionally, once manufactured household goods became readily available, the market for more expensive items (handmade by family matriarchs) quickly dried up. Not only did the household responsibilities change for women after the Civil War and during The Revolution, so did, as Lener puts it,

their role as economic producers and as political members of society ... Women's work outside of the home no longer met with social approval ... Many business and professional occupations formerly open to women were now closed ... The entry of large numbers of women into low status, low pay and low skill industrial work had fixed such work by definition as "woman's work" ... At the same time the genteel lady of fashion had become a model of American femininity and the definition of "woman's proper sphere" seemed narrower and more confined than ever. (7)

Besides widening the gender divide, the new standards for women increased the emphasis on femininity and "woman's proper sphere." The "ideal" body became one that was meant to be a physical representation of a placid temperament – soft features, gentle hands, light voices, and a generally pleasing look. Because women (namely middle-class and white women) were no

longer required (or expected) to partake in physical labor, the image of women as a whole grew soft. Any sort of injury, callousing, or marring of women labeled them as rough and ragged – both physically and (assumably) temperamentally as well. As a result, the idea of beauty and what it takes for a woman to be aesthetically pleasing became the new standard for women. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her work “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” notes that

the classical ideal [of appearance] was to be worshipped rather than imitated, but increasingly in modernity the ideal has migrated to become the paradigm which is to be attained ... [and that] the standardization of the female body that the beauty system mandates has become a goal to be achieved through self-regulation and consumerism.  
(339)

This new world of consumerism and split spheres enhanced male expectations of female beauty as it offered more easily-obtainable beauty products and created the free time needed for women to craft an “ideal” appearance, which Thomson shows in her example of the wide availability of corsets.

To promote domestic roles and constricting guidelines, women began to be thought of as “The Angel in the House.” This “idyllic” position for women appeared in literature where the domestic sphere becomes the woman’s own realm – a place of her own that exists separately from male and political influences. Presumably untouched by the outside society, the male ideal of the “Angel in the House” describes a woman who is devoted to her children, submissive to her husband, and dedicated to housekeeping. They are the ones to make sure that the home runs smoothly while the men work in the public sphere. Though believed to be separate from public influences, these “Angels” were still expected to abide by and be subjected to society’s

expectations. Regardless of how often the realm of the “angel” was depicted as being a world of its own, women were able to achieve that title (and therefore her own space) only through by meeting society’s instructions and guidelines. Only with society’s approval can a woman move from monstrous outcast to celestial caregiver. However, this idyllic image does not allow for women to obtain their own autonomy as they are still excluded the public sphere. Nonetheless, some women turned the idea of the “Angel in the House” on its head. In these cases, the home becomes a central location of power and, as Jane Tompkins states, “is conceived as a dynamic center of activity, physical and spiritual, economic and moral, whose influence spreads out in ever-widening circles” (287). Thus, the “angels” in the home are able to influence others without physically being in the public sphere. The “angels” are able to provide care and stability for those who are subjected to the fast paced and ever-changing world of the public sphere. Though they are defined by societal standards, they are able to use their fixed position to influence others, giving them a sense of autonomy and power that was normally only achieved through public involvement.

With the new importance placed on women’s domestic position, femininity, and physical attractiveness, those who deviated even slightly were considered deformed, disabled, and, in some cases, morally or spiritually inferior. In “Narrative Prosthesis” (2000), Maria Stafford argues that the rigidness of social standards for women made it easy to recognize those deemed “abnormal” because “there [was] only a single way of being healthy and lovely, but an infinity of ways of being sick and wretched” (qtd. in Mitchell and Snyder 227). As a result, those who deviated from the norm became the focus of the society around them – whether it be through pity, disapproval, or curiosity. Though they received a lot of attention from their surrounding communities, they are never truly seen as part of the community. In his book *Disability Studies:*

*An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Dan Goodly discusses how people with disabilities were (and still are, to a great extent) confined to a “marginalized place in society, culture, economics and politics” (1). While all disabled people experience judgment and marginalization from society, scholars have noted that *women* with disabilities, both physical and mental, experience worse conditions than disabled males:

Disabled women are more likely to be poor than disabled men; are less likely to have access to rehabilitation and employment; are more likely to experience public space as threatening; are more likely to live in the parental home ... women are “physically” disabled by sexist society, through the application of rigid standards of feminine body comportment, objectification and invasion, which stipulate how women should hold and act themselves. (Goodly 35)

The expectation of having to inhabit the domestic sphere and to possess a body/appearance that is socially acceptable limits the disabled person’s independence. Ultimately, this leaves the identity of many disabled females (and other disabled people) completely at the mercy of society and unable to establish their own autonomy. Lennard J. Davis in *The Disability Studies Reader* says that, therefore, “the person enters into an identical relationship with the body, the body forms the identity, and the identity is unchangeable and indelible as one’s place on the normal curve” (4). Because women are defined by their physical appearances by themselves and society, they become a fixed point on the bell curve that positions them as normal (the abled, beautiful women) or outliers (the disabled, deformed women).

In literature, disabled or disfigured women are often presented as abnormal and disruptive characters who cause adversity for the hero and/or the other “normal” characters. Some of these characters in early (pre-19<sup>th</sup>-century) women’s literature are portrayed as

deformed and grotesque, with the iconic images being those of witches or hags who stir up some kind of turmoil. However, this exaggerated depiction of deformed female characters began to change over time, particularly in the work by 19<sup>th</sup> century American female authors. For example, Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Towne Poor" (1880), and Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Mistaken Charity" (1887) are 19<sup>th</sup> century works in which the physical disability and/or deformity is meant to represent a character's socially affected positions rather than a mark of an evil disposition and nature.

Additionally, Lennard Davis notes that while in many texts it "is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities ... [but] minor characters ... can be deformed in ways that arouse pity" (9). While 19<sup>th</sup> century authors, both male and female, continued to exclude disabled characters from major roles in their texts, some women writers did the opposite. Their disabled characters are not pushed aside as pitied, minor characters but are positioned in the center of the text either as the main character or the character who spurs the main characters into action. Although some of these characters may draw pity from the reader and/or main characters, most of them still establish a sense of identity and autonomy within the confining position society has created for them. These female authors disregard the traditional role of the deformed by focusing on the position within the community that society has forced upon them rather than their physical appearance.

Although 19-century American women writers Rebecca Harding Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Wilkins Freeman do not necessarily use "monstrous" bodies, their disabled/deformed female characters stand out physically from their "normal" female counterparts. The differences in the characters' physical appearances include not only the severity of their disabilities but also the starkness of the representations. In response to the

unfairness that was occurring in the society around them, many women began writing short fiction with physically deformed and/or disabled female characters to reflect these social changes. Some of the deformities are exacerbated by social stigma, while others highlight the unnecessary and damaging effects that charities can have. Either way, these authors are commenting on the social activism at the time. The focus and importance of this social activism, however, varies within the authors' works. Despite the variance, all three authors indicate that both the "bad" (social stigmas) and the "good" (charities) contribute to the position and (possibly) the disability that these characters have as well as the problems that they face. However, the degree in which the "bad" and the "good" affect the disabled characters depends on the author's position on the effectiveness of charities as well as the intentions behind the "helpful" acts.

One way in which in Davis, Jewett, and Freeman use disability is to demonstrate that the "unfitness" of some citizens' bodies may reflect the diseased nature of the country. As Davis puts it, "If individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit" (6). "Not fit," here, can mean any sort of abnormal, unattractive, or physically deformed female body. Thus, the deformed/disabled female characters are not only representing the unfairness of the aesthetic standards for women, but also of the national standards concerning an individual's (and especially a woman's) place in society.

Along with the marginalization that disabled people (and women in particular) experienced, the need to normalize and/or reform those who are physically deformed/abnormal often subjected them to misguided charity and/or reform efforts. Goodly notes that "historically, disabled people were supported via *patronage* and *charity*, through organisations for disabled people" that not only aimed to "aid" those disabled and excluded, but also to create active

positions for those already situated in society (3). Many middle-class women used this charity work as way to enter the public sphere while still, theoretically, remaining in the domestic sphere. Because the body “has traditionally been seen within patriarchy as the province of women ... the rhetoric and activism of reform allowed women to appropriate their authority as the traditional representatives ... transforming it from a social stigma to a ... social calling” (Thomson 130). With the rise of social involvement in charities and assistance for disabled people, able-bodied, middle-class women could now work their way back into the public setting in positions similar to those they held during the farm economy. Thus, the “benevolent” acts committed and social responsibilities felt by the affluent women resulted in the use of the poor to enhance middle class women’s power and presence in the public sphere. Davis, Jewett, and Freeman all address this idea differently from believing in the effectiveness of outside help, to questioning the true purpose behind social involvement, to mocking the charities that “aid” the disabled/deformed female characters.

This melding of the public and domestic sphere, though beneficial for middle-class women, did not promise the same fulfillment and autonomy for disabled women. Viewed as the outcasts from society, disabled people tended to be receivers of charitable acts that left them at the mercy of society’s desire to help them - not more powerful dispensers of charity. Goodly notes that if, according to Marx’s view, “charity is the perfume of the sewers of capitalism,” working to mask the physical deformities that line the marginalized space of society, “then disabled people are subjected to the bitter/sweet interventions of charity” (2). Davis, Jewett, and Freeman address this idea of a “bitter/sweet” charity differently, varying the involvement and/or effectiveness of society in relation to the severity of the disabled/deformed female characters. In pairing the disabled women with socially active women, the authors are not only addressing the

usefulness of social involvement, but also demonstrating each author's personal view of society and her response to marginalized characters.

The authors' deliberate use of characters with different forms of physical disability confirms Linda Curti's idea that "the relation among women of . . . different power has been the object of female reflection" (22), allowing the disabled and/or deformed characters to stand as a representation of female history. Davis, Jewett, and Freeman's stories not only address the social realities that people may not want to discuss, but also demonstrate that "literature does not merely reflect any already socially interpreted reality, but adds another tier of interpretation" (Quayson 14). Quayson means that literature, especially through the representation of disabilities and deformities, does not just reinforce societal norms but, instead, challenges them through different interpretations of disabled/deformed individuals, such as individuality and independence. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century short stories discussed in this thesis show characters who range from unattractive females who are not only subjected to male domination but also to female charity, to elderly and physically impaired women who, in one way or another, are able to gain autonomy.

Perhaps equally important, choosing to write about female bodies through the scope of physical disability and/or deformity allows these female authors to enter into the public sphere with their works. By exploring the marginalization that comes from disability, Davis, Jewett, and Freeman are able to comment on the social structures that were in place at the time. Quayson notes in his book *Aesthetic Nervousness* that "Because disability in the real world already incites interpretation, literary representations of disability are not merely reflecting disability; they are refractions of that reality, with varying emphases of both an aesthetic and ethical kind" (36). Although the disabled characters may sometimes act as plot devices, their use in literature is,



according to Quayson, not to help their creators to discuss the disability itself but to raise issues about society's response and/or interaction with those who are deformed/disabled.

The three female authors discussed here come from different social backgrounds, which resulted in their viewing charity differently and having distinct views about how social standards affect their marginalized subjects. Rebecca Harding Davis, a middle-class woman who most likely never set foot in a working mill, chose to write about the working class, which, as Carolina Miles states in her essay "Representing and Self-Mutilating the Laboring Male Body," "offers a complex contradictory vision of class because it stems both from her investment in middle-class national ideology and from her social consciousness" (100). Although Davis attempts to draw attention to the conditions of the iron mills by addressing the audience directly, her disabled character still becomes a kind of product of society's attempt to normalize, correct, and marginalize her, thereby maintaining middle-class standards.

Like Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett was a middle-class woman from a prominent New England family. Marcia Noe and Ashley Hopkins say that as a strong advocate for charities who donated to and participated in charities herself, Jewett, "through the greater role she gives to men in the story, ... puts more emphasis on the institutional cause of her impoverished [characters'] predicament" (27). Despite the helpful intentions of the charitable acts, Jewett focuses on the physical effects normalizing institutions may have on marginalized characters. Additionally, Jewett hints at the intent of charitable acts by middle class women in the text without demonstrating the actual act of charity, leaving the marginalized characters in their disabled states.

As a child, Mary Wilkins Freeman was part of the working class and received charity herself throughout her lifetime, which added a personal connection to and understanding of the

unintended effects and hidden selfishness of charity. Freeman also addresses the selfish acts of charity that come from some middle class women, demonstrating that sometimes people are “so focused on [their] own efforts to do good that [they] fail to see truly those who are in need,” or, in the case of Freeman’s text, those perceived to be in need, which does not allow them to truly “see, respect, and honor [the disabled characters’] essential human dignity and worth” (Noe and Hopkins 31). Freeman shifts her focus more to the autonomy of the disabled characters and how, despite what others may think, they are capable of working hard and creating their own identity similar to the way she worked to do herself.

In order to trace these differences, each story will be discussed in its own chapter, starting with the earliest, “Life in the Iron Mills” by Rebecca Harding Davis, moving to “The Town Poor” by Sarah Orne Jewett, and ending with the most socially-critical work, “A Mistaken Charity” by Mary Wilkins Freeman. Each chapter will discuss how the presence of a disability and/or deformity represents not only the characters’ social positions, but also the characters’ autonomy, based on how visible the affliction is. Additionally, the chapters will also demonstrate how the disabled characters are connected to the social views of charities that are presented within the texts. Just as Quayson discusses literature’s ability to approach “realities” from a different perspective and add another tier to reality, these three authors focus their writing on different aspects of the disabled/deformed characters’ experience through the use of multiple types of disabilities and/or deformities, which vary based on the viewpoints and influence society has over these marginalized characters.

## Chapter 2

### The Imprisonment of Deformities and the Necessity of Charitable Assistance in Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills"

Rebecca Harding Davis is one of the first female American authors who, through her education, wealth, and position, uses the disfigured woman as a way to discuss social and economic inequalities and promote the charities that assist disabled/deformed lower class individuals. Writing about the "anonymity and uniformity required of industrial millworkers" allows Davis to mirror the "social reality that expected a similar docility from women" (Molyneaux 160). Because industrial workers are meant to be uniform in order to ensure the best and most consistent work possible, the life of industrial workers is similar to the societal expectations of women to behave and appear a certain way in the domestic sphere.

Davis, according to Molyneaux, "found herself writing from the borders of both the intertwined worlds" of both the "'public' world of historical change and the seemingly unrelated 'private' lives of middle class women" (160). Writing during a period where women were part of special literary sphere and supposed to write sentimental, domestic fiction, Davis chose to write "Life in the Iron Mills" anonymously and also with the use of a male hero in an attempt to enter the "literary and industrial realms she perceived as otherwise hostile to her" (Molyneaux 161). In an attempt to show that both men and women can be crippled by oppressive factors, Davis disfigures both a male and female character to illustrate the conditions of lower-class workers. By doing this, Davis is not only fighting against wealthy males, but she is also appealing to well-to-do females who have an understanding of the confining nature of societal standards, though perhaps not to the extent of their disabled counterparts. In spite of this, however, it is only Deb, the disabled and deformed woman, who can receive help. While it is only with charitable help

that these disabled females are able to achieve an unoppressed lifestyle, men are unable to be helped at all by charities – leaving them imprisoned in their marginalized state.

To make her social statement, Davis puts herself directly into the text with the use of the ‘I’ narrator and questions that are directed specifically to the reader and intended audience. “Life in the Iron Mills” opens with a smoke and soot-filled scene that the narrator is viewing from her window. The narrator directly addresses the readers, telling them to “Stop a moment . . . . I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me . . . I want you to hear this story” (41). In doing so, the narrator is showing that this story, by evoking a sense of pity for those who are physically disabled and/or deformed, is meant to stir readers into doing something to help those who, like the characters in the story, are unable to help themselves.

The outside world is filled with smoke, both from the iron mills and the pipe smoke of the Irishmen, and dimmed by rain, and the inside of the narrator’s home mirrors the broken world that surrounds her:

Here, inside, is a little broken figure of an angel pointing upward from the mantel-shelf; but even its wings are covered with smoke, blotted and black. Smoke everywhere! A dirty canary chirps desolately in a cage beside me. Its dream of green fields and sunshine is a very old dream – almost worn out, I think. (40)

While the bird represents Hugh Wolfe, Deb’s cousin and iron mill worker who has dreamed of escaping over the hills and into the beauty of the smoke-free world, the broken angel represents not only Deb but also the idea of the “angel in the house.” While Deb, in her own way, abides by this “angel in the house” role through her love for Hugh, bringing him dinner every night and making sure she does everything in her power to help him, she is not the ideal version of this

angelic domestic creature. Instead, the broken angel statue is Davis' "[caricature of] the nineteenth-century idealization of woman as the 'angel in the house' in a world that is, like Deb, deformed by class and gender inequity" (163). Both Hugh and Deb are represented in an unattractive, if not broken, way through the narrator's initial introduction of the iron mill town yet are held to different societal expectations due to their genders.

Davis' story is focused on one man, Hugh Wolfe, who "had already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man" (47) and who is seen as "one of the girl-men" whose "muscles were thin ... nerves weak ... face (a meek, woman's face) haggard" (47). This description of Hugh, according to Caroline Miles, "provides one of the first unsettling literary depictions of the non-African-American male worker, an unnerving delineation that attempts to combat the picturesque displacement of the working classes" (90). It is interesting that Davis presents the idea of man physically resembling a woman in order to depict the decline of the white working-class male as a result of the industrial changes and advancements that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By "deforming" Hugh as a woman, Davis positions him as a lesser being, stripping away his identity and self-determination. This appearance of femininity has left Hugh completely powerless to the oppressing forces around him, placing him in the subservient position that is usually inhabited by women.

If the economic fall of man ultimately makes him a woman, then female disfiguration becomes almost monstrous. Deborah, a devoted counterpart to Hugh, "Was like him; only her face was even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery. She wore a faded cotton gown and a slouching bonnet. When she walked, one could see that she was deformed, almost a hunchback" (1108). Her unattractive appearance seems to negate her goodness and charity. By deforming Deb into an unappealing figure, Davis is creating an uncanny representation of

women, where the “bodies are familiar – as they embody a return to something where each of us has been – and mysterious at the same time, representing that which cannot be known, or even looked at” (Curti 107). Ultimately, Davis creates a doubling between the “Angel of the House” and the monstrous being she can become. Deb is still the devoted caregiver to Hugh, a man whom she loves but who does not love her back, and yet she has the physical appearance of the unappealing monster. Davis is attempting to draw the autonomous women’s attention back to those women who are physically hunched over from the societal and male pressure put on them. To keep them below the newly-deformed men, the oppressed women are even more disfigured by society.

Deb’s deformities are so prominent that when she goes to the mill to give Hugh food, all of the other men comment “Hyur comes t’ hunchback, Wolfe” (46). Hugh, though trying to be nice to her, puts her in her place by having her nap in the “heap of ash ... that was the refuse of the burnt iron” (46). It is evident that, despite Wolfe is being disfigured as a woman-man who works in the dirty mills, he does not regard Deb as anything more than the dirt beneath his feet. Even Deb notices that “in spite of all his kindness, that there was that in her face and form which made him loathe the sight of her” (47). Her position beneath the feminine man and the rest of society invokes a sense of sympathy for Deb -- the response that Davis is willing her readers to experience in order to recognize disabled women around them and promote charitable actions.

While the mill owner and his wealthy male visitors are sitting on the bricks in the mill, the doctor takes note of Hugh’s craftsmanship with korl, the waste material that comes from separating ore in order to obtain pig metal (Molyneau 159). He notices and is captured the ungainly female sculpture Hugh has made from the material:

There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscle, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's ... a working woman, – the very type of her class. (53)

The sympathy, if not pity, that Davis evokes through the image of Deb and the korl woman makes Deb's action of picking the pocket of Mitchell, one of the wealthy mill visitors, easier to understand. The korl woman, like Deb, is not a beautiful, attractive woman who embodies the ideal of 19<sup>th</sup> century "Angel of the House." However, the image of the korl woman is striking to the wealthy men as it is the figure of a social world that they do not understand. When the doctor is talking about the statue to Hugh, Mitchell mentions the idea that this figure can provide wealth for Hugh, something that is necessary for the current society. "Yes, money, - that is it,' ... 'You've found the cure for all the world's diseases" (57). Believing that money is a way to ensure a woman's significance (such as the korl woman) and a man's success, Deb picks Mitchell's pocket in attempt to better her and Hugh's life. By removing herself financially from the working class, Deb will no longer be "hunchback Deb," who is covered in smoke and soot. Instead, she believes she has the possibility to shed her socially-constructed identity and enter the world of an attractive, middle class woman.

However, Deb's actions do not propel her or Hugh out of their socially-defined roles. Instead, they are further confined by society after being imprisoned - Hugh for nineteen years and Deb for three. With no way to escape - not just the jail cell but also the lower-class life that Hugh has been oppressed by for so long, he views suicide as his only option – a decision that becomes his only autonomous action in the story.

It is not until Hugh's suicide that Deb is able to experience kindness from another person. By coming under the care of the Quaker woman, "a homely body, coarsely dressed in gray and white" (72), Deb is offered a charitable assistance that has never been extended to her before. The Quaker woman tells Deb that "thee shall begin thy life again, - there on the hills. I came too late; but not for thee, -- by God's help, it may be" (1130). By offering to take Hugh and bury him in a happy place as well as giving Deb a place outside of the smoke fill iron mill town, the Quaker woman, an image of both social and spiritual reform, subsequently buries Hugh in the 'green fields and sunshine' or his dreams, implying that his suicide, like Deb's conversion into a pious Quaker after a brief, purgatorial prison sentence, is a spiritually redemptive triumph. (Molyneaux 173)

Davis uses the Quaker woman as a model for the actions middle-class women should take to help their fellow women. Davis is demonstrating that by caring for and teaching the "other" women, her peers are able to enhance their own autonomy by helping others. By creating such a grotesque, disfigured female character and doubling her with the Quaker woman, Davis has portrayed both sides of women's reality. Additionally, Davis demonstrates how the men of the period fail at charity. The male characters in the story, even the ones who put Hugh and Deb in jail, are presented with multiple opportunities to help Hugh and save him from not only his incarcerated state but also himself. The multiple male characters do not allow for a chance at transformation or charity; instead, it just solidifies the class difference and single reality of the male social reality. Drawing on Fuller, Davis' deformed Deb and capable Quaker woman show that the changed women are the only ones who are able to help the disfigured women pull away the mask to find their new reflection while the men are unable to help not only themselves but those in need.



Despite what she believed to be her best attempt, Deb is unable to change her position in society. Her deformed figure and lower social class leave her at the mercy of those around her. Society placed Deb there, and ultimately, only society can help her create a new identity. Once Deb assumes her new Quaker position, her deformity is not the focus of her identity. Instead, she is in a place where it is “needed to make healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul” (73). Though she was plucked from her oppressed position in the iron mill town, Deb is brought, through charity, to a new life. This early work of female disability and deformity thus demonstrates that these women are unable to help themselves and, in order to fit into society, must rely on the help of other women to “reform” them.

Davis’s focus on charitable success emphasizes the idea that the disabled/marginalized characters are unable to establish themselves outside of society’s guidelines without the assistance of others. As a result, it is only the established women who can lend a hand to their less fortunate sisters and liberate them from their imprisoned state. However, the charitable act of the Quaker woman moved Deb to a different marginalized position that took her out of society. Though no longer confined to life in the iron mills, it is unclear whether or not Deb is able to establish a peaceful and productive existence. While charitable acts can provide better conditions for the disabled, they do not always result in the most ideal situations or promote individual autonomy. The Quaker woman’s true sense of identity is never established outside of her kindness and deliverance of Deb. As a result, she is cast as an almost angelic being that allows her to exist in her own realm, promoting her ability to succeed outside of the public world. However, the focus is more on the act of helping Deb rather than the real identity and success of either character. As a result, autonomy is never firmly established for either female which leaves

questions to be asked about the success of the charities that aim to help the disabled as well as the women who perform the acts.

Davis focuses her work on the need for charitable acts, even calling for her readers to take their own stance in their communities to help those around them. However, not all female authors of the time felt the same way. Both Jewett and Freeman view these benevolent acts of “help” in a different way that focuses more on the harmful effects of charity rather than the liberating, though still confining, outcome Deb experiences.

### Chapter 3

#### Victimizing the Disabled and Misplaced Charity in Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Town Poor"

In her 1880 short story "The Town Poor," Sarah Orne Jewett tells the story of two elderly sisters who are not only physically impaired, but also victimized by the social "charities" that were in place at the time. Jewett's use of the "rural, female, unmarried ... [and] poor characters [who] live well outside the centers of power and urban social hierarchies" (Pryse 313) illustrates the socially oppressive state of women. At the time, social reforms were very popular as a way to help the nation function. With the separation of male and female spheres, "reform this became domesticity's conduit through which women might leave the confines of the home while still remaining firmly within the prescribed domestic roles" (Thomson 129). The oppressive state of both the disabled women and the women who help them leads to reform or the need for reform.

Though the focus of these reform systems was to make the nation better and, in a way, give women the opportunity and ability to speak out, write, lecture, command, and organize in the name of reform, the result was not always ideal due to the focus on the bodies of the oppressed rather than political change that was often limited and not as beneficial or influential. The focus of the reform was fixed to the physical appearance of the body and the physical state of the person. As Thomson states, "almost all reform ... focused on bodily excesses like drinking and licentiousness, health and cleanliness, eating and dressing practices, bodily deprivations caused by poverty or bad living conditions, and the enslavement of the body" (130). While the intent of these charitable reforms was good, especially on the women's part, not all of the results were desirable. Jewett addresses such a situation in "The Town Poor," showing that the attempt

to control the body can lead to disability and deformation of the body, as well as (potentially) the mind, while also marginalizing and degrading those who are controlled.

Jewett's short story starts with a widowed woman, Mrs. Trimble, who has made her own independent niche in society after the death of her husband, becoming known as "an active business woman, [who] looked after her own affairs herself, in all weathers" (1244). Accompanied by her philanthropic friend, Miss Rebecca Wright, the women are returning home from travelling when they decide to visit their old acquaintances, the Bray sisters. Similar to that of Davis' middle-class narrator who views the life of iron mill workers, Jewett's story uses "the conventional narrative strategy ... in which the middle-class reader or her materially comfortable fictional stand-in is conducted on a kind of tour of the site that the story would inspire to change" (Thomson 132). The focus of this story is the life of poor women who are limited by male-constructed social standards. Additionally, the socio-economic position of the Bray sisters is highlighted both through the body, Mandy's poor eyesight and Ann's lame wrist, and the physical condition of their home. Thus the narrative strategy "is one of witness. The narrator and reader witness the body which indexes the suffering to which they respond emotionally and the move to ameliorate ... The suffering of poverty must be visually apprehensible to the spectator for sentiment and revelation to occur" (Thomson 132). Readers are meant to scrutinize the social system that has left these two women in their current state, and encouraged to assist the disabled and/or deformed. However, Jewett's text also takes a critical look, if only glancingly, at those middle class women who advocate charity and social reform but do not take any concrete action.

On their way to see the Bray sisters, the two women discuss Deacon Bray and how once he was gone, his children were left to their own devices, and while "they had their little home," their father did not leave them in a secure position and despite "all their industrious ways, they

hadn't means to keep it" (1245). Due to Deacon Bray's constant remodeling of the church and meeting house and his generous giving to collections, the two sisters were left with very little money to keep up their middle-class lifestyle, ultimately preventing them from maintaining their position in society. Treated as a civil duty, the Bray sisters were auctioned off and "lodged by order of the indifferent city fathers in a kind of proto-welfare system" (Thomson). The family that the town chose to house the sisters, the Janes, received money from the town in order to care for their tenants – five dollars a month, which doesn't allow for much luxury. The auctioning of the sisters is a statement about the value of women with no societal standing, either in the domestic sphere or workforce. Jewett, who was an advocate for charity work and often donated to church fairs, "preferred that charitable giving and care taking be private endeavors," and while "reluctant to criticize the system of auctioning off the town poor too harshly" (Noe and Hopkins 29), demonstrates the negative effects of such public charity through the use of physical space and bodily images.

The first representation of disabled and deformed state is the house that the town and town fathers believed to be the only option for the Bray sisters. The exterior of the house greeted Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca with a "gnawed corner of the door-yard fence ... two or three ragged old hens [that] were pecking about the yard" (1246). Once led into the kitchen of the main house by Mrs. Jane, Mrs. Trimble notes that "the air felt more chill inside the house" (1246) and that Mrs. Jane "looked pinched and miserable herself, though it was evident that she had no gift at house or home" (1247). The judgment of Mrs. Jane and her domestic abilities not only criticizes the town for leaving the Bray sisters with someone who is unable to maintain her home, but also hints at an ideal domestic sphere. Mrs. Jane's inability to maintain her home places her and her husband at the lower end of society. Shut away in the attic above the Janes'

unappealing home, the “unwelcomed tenants” (1246) are identified as disabled and unattractive outcasts, further marginalizing the Bray sisters from society.

Immediately upon entering the attic, Mrs. Trimble places the blame on the “selec’men” and “the well-to-do town of Hampden [who] could provide no better for its poor than this” (1248). The domestic setting that Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca are met with is one of neglect, not only of the room but also of the bodies and lives of the Bray sisters. “The eager guests stared into a small, low room, brown with age, and gray, too, as if former dust and cobwebs could not be made wholly to disappear. The two elderly women who stood there looked like captives. Their withered faces wore a look of apprehension” (1247). The room that the two sisters share is decrepit and worn in the same way that the sisters are. The Bray sisters’ room with a “small table in the middle of the floor, with some crackers on a plate ... [has] added a great deal to the general desolation” (1247) of the sisters’ situation. The visit from the Bray sisters’ old friends brings up nostalgic memories of their old house and the times the women shared there, reinforcing the marginalized position of the two sisters. However, Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca are not blameless in the Bray sisters’ situation, and “are full of guilt at their own neglect of the Brays as well as anger at the ... town selectmen and church elders [who] have bungled the job” (Noe and Hopkins 29). Neither of the women has been to visit the sisters since they moved into the Janes’ attic. More importantly, neither of the women was there to help them move in the dead of winter. Mrs. Trimble claims that “if [she] hadn’t been down with ... pleurisy fever [she’d] have stirred round an’ done somethin’ about it” (1245). Nevertheless, both women were not there for the Bray sisters during a trying time.

Despite the obvious difference in social class, it is the physical disfiguration that truly sets the two pairs of women apart. Miss Rebecca even comments on the societal effects of the

Bray sisters' disability, stating that "if Mandy'd been spared such poor eyesight, an' Ann hadn't got her lame wrist that wa'n't set right, they'd kep' off the town fast enough" (1244). The physical state of the Bray sisters is what put them in the crosshairs in the first place. With no man to care for them and no financial security, the pitiful women were subjected to a society whose duty it was to normalize their situation. In the case of the Bray sisters, the plan was to sentence them to a farm house on the outskirts of town that, through its physical appearance, depicts the social identity and worth of the women. As a result, the Bray sisters are inmates of societal displacement, stripped of their autonomy and identified by their physical disabilities and deformities.

The difference in the disabilities of the two sisters also affects the way they respond to their situation. With impaired eyesight as her sole limitation, Mandy is, for the most part, able to appear normal to those who are unaware of her disability. Many times, those with non-visible disabilities "wish to assimilate or choose to pass" as normal or non-disabled (Samuels 321). Though Mandy has the ability to pass as normal, her displaced state and deformed position has a more visibly distressing effect on her due to the mental disfiguration and loss of autonomy. While Mandy sobs in front of the two guests (1248), Ann seems determined to show that, despite her physical appearance, she has not been broken. Though Ann Bray's deformity is much more visible than her sisters', she is determined to not let it define her. While "she carried her right arm in a sling, with piteously dropping fingers," a physical embodiment of the sister's fall from society, Ann still "gazed at the visitors with radiant joy" (1247). The injury and deformation of Ann's arm mirrors the injuries that one sustains after a bad fall, directly alluding to the idea of the women forcefully falling from society due to the "charitable" acts of the town. While Ann is physically disfigured from the situation and her sister is visually impaired, Ann still attempts to

maintain the subservient, “angel of the house” role by being a happy and gracious host. She works to maintain their living space as best she can, and even offers refreshments to Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca. The act of domesticity, though adhering to the societal standard of women at the time, is Ann’s way of trying to assert herself beyond her deformity. She is still an independent woman who cares for not only herself but also her sister. Because Ann is able to assume the injury as part of her identity, her disability does not traumatize her as it does her sister. Nevertheless, the socially-ascribed identities and glaringly-apparent disabilities of the two women are the only focus of Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca – evoking self-blame and pity.

The physical and economic troubles of the Bray sisters become an “essential rhetorical [element] in [Jewett’s argument] for humanitarian social reform” (Thomson 556). Ann’s “suffering body . . . manifests the marks of its misery,” while also representing the culturally bound body “that [testifies] to its own suffering [and can] function as an anchor for interpretation and provide a clarity of mission for middle-class women seeking authority and influence in the wider world through reform work” (Thomson 132). Despite her attempt at independence, Ann (and consequently her sister) are just a charitable undertaking for Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca. Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca are unable to (or possibly refuse to) acknowledge Ann’s independence, no matter how futile it is, because “if the poor can alter their own circumstances, the rescuer becomes redundant” (134).

Jewett, a woman who was raised in an upper class family and was the charity giver rather than charity receiver, wants to maintain focus on the necessity for women to help those who are (seemingly) unable to help themselves. While the charitable acts may have good intentions, they overpower the disabled independent person who, in Jewett’s story, is making the best of her situation and caring for herself. Because “the reader sees and hears more from Mrs. Trimble and



Rebecca Wright, the charity givers” (Noe and Hopkins 31), the Bray sisters, namely Ann, are unable to assert their own autonomy. Despite all attempts at normalcy, Mrs. Trimble and Rebecca Write (and as a result the reader) are only focused on the debilitating aspects of the situation, which are highlighted through the Bray sisters’ deformities/disabilities. While the subtle criticism of the system is there, even ending the story with Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca driving away with a promise of “startin’ with the *selec*’men” (1250), the idea the disabled and deformed women are unable to help themselves still stands.

Like Davis, Jewett leaves the fate of the Bray girls in the hands of the middle-class women who *talk* about helping the sisters, but never take any concrete action. Additionally, the scene of Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca leaving the home further implies how marginalized the Bray sisters are from the rest of society. While visiting the sisters, Mrs. Trimble and Miss Rebecca are “momentarily aligned with [the Bray sisters’] bodily limitations;” however, they are able to “[retreat] from that identification by escaping to [their homes” (Thomson 133). Though both Davis and Jewett, advocate charity for those in need, both authors prevent their disabled characters from achieving any form of autonomy. While the disabled females receive, or are *promised* help from their fellow women, they remain marginalized – both physically and socially. The narrators’ ability to remove themselves physically and socially from the pitied, deformed women in both Davis’ and Jewett’s works indicates that, in spite of their good intentions, middle class women and charities are sometimes as crippling and confining as physical disabilities and financial limitations.

## Chapter 4

### Accepting Disability and Asserting Autonomy in Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Mistaken Charity"

Unlike Rebecca Harding Davis and Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman takes a different narrative approach in her short story, "A Mistaken Charity," which was written in 1887. Although like Davis and Jewett, Freeman had an interest in the societal treatment of poor, disabled women because she had a more personal connection to poverty. Normally, "disabled people are treated as objects rather than as authors of their own lives: 'person fixing' rather than 'context changing' interventions are [usually] circulated" (Goodly 8). Though both Davis and Jewett present a critical (though somewhat subtle) view of the societal standards that define their female characters both bodily and socioeconomically, neither "Life in the Iron Mills" or "The Town Poor" truly demonstrates how disabled characters promote change in the way society views outsiders of the community.

Mary Wilkins Freeman came from a life of poverty where, after the failure of her father's business, the family had to reside in their pastor's home, where her mother worked as a housekeeper (Marchalonis 304). As a recipient of charity herself, Freeman approaches her fiction with a deeper understanding of what it is like to live as a marginalized individual. Therefore, Freeman is able to write "*her* story from the point of view of the poor because she *was* poor" (Noe and Hopkins 31). This understanding allows Freeman to offer a critical look at the charities that are intended to help the poor. As an outsider, Freeman is able to see what other outsiders see which is "the aura of rigid social decorum and fixed personal expectations that dominated the mentality of the late nineteenth-century" (Pennell 207). Freeman allows for marginalized characters to author their own stories and, in turn, author their own identities, with or without charity.

Additionally, “A Mistaken Charity” addresses the difference that exists between visible and invisible disabilities. In her essay “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out,” Ellen Samuels presents a common claim “that passing as ‘normal’ is by definition a form of negative disability identity” (321). What Samuels means by “negative disability identity” is that those who appear to be and are able to pass as normal are automatically identified as being non-disabled. With no physical indication of a deformity or disability in her characters, Freeman is not only able to give her disabled women a narrative voice, but also able to take a critical approach to the social systems in place. Despite their ability to appear normal, the “women in [Freeman’s] fiction who exert their wills are often placed at the margins of communities, but this marginality gives them a degree of freedom to reject social codes and expectations” (Pennell 208). Deciding to remain in the margins of society gives Freeman’s disabled figures, the Shattuck sisters, the opportunity to accept their disabled and/or deformed condition which promotes autonomy, even as the outcasts of society.

The story opens with the two sisters going about their daily tasks in their home, “one with a tin pan and old knife searching for dandelion greens . . . and the other sitting on the door-step watching her, or, rather, having the appearance of watching her” (143). While the scene appears domestic enough, the setting is quickly, though subtly, altered by the women’s disabilities. Once the sister on the door-step asks the other sister, Harriet, a question, her disability becomes evident through her voice: “the cracked, quavering notes that she used reached out of themselves, and asked, and groped like fingers in the dark. One would have known by the voice that the old woman was blind” (143). While she does not have a walking stick or a white cane that one can easily see and associate with a physical disability, her voice acts as a feeler, reaching out into the

world not only in search for answers, but also as an assertion of her disabled identity. While Charlotte's disability is presented first, Harriet's appears shortly after:

The old woman on her knees in the grass searching for dandelions did not reply; she evidently had not heard the question. So the old woman on the door-step ... asked again, varying her question slightly, and speaking louder ... The old woman on the grass heard this time [and] rose slowly and laboriously; the effort of straightening out the rheumatic old muscles was evidently a painful one. (143)

Harriet's inability to hear her sister the first time raises suspicion of her hearing abilities, but the disability is not confirmed until she struggles to get up from the ground. Rather than having a hunched back or a misshapen, lame wrist, the two elderly sisters are disabled by hidden ailments that cannot be immediately labeled.

Though the disabilities formed as the sisters aged, the subtle appearance of the Shattuck sisters' physical ailments are directly identified by their domestic state. "When Harriet Shattuck grew deaf and rheumatic ... and Charlotte Shattuck lost her eyesight" (144), both women were forced to give up their jobs, Harriet as a tailor and Charlotte as a seamstress. The Shattuck sisters, however, were no strangers to poverty, their family having "always been poor people and common people" (144), but the loss of their livelihoods also left them without "the one hope of ability to keep a roof over their heads, covering on their backs, and victuals in their mouths" (144). Although the sisters are economically disabled for most of their lives, the physical disabilities left them in need of some societal help, which they had been able to avoid (until the time of the story) since the death of their parents. Apparently, it was not a societal priority to assist the Shattuck sisters in their time of need for "it was a small and trifling charity for the rich man who held a mortgage on the little house in which they had been born and lived in all their

lives to give them use of it, rent and interest free” (144). Being able to claim the little cottage that they have resided in their whole lives as their own promotes a sense of autonomy in the women, in spite of their physical disabilities.

The act of giving the sisters the home, though generous and considerate, positions the now-disabled women outside of the everyday world. Similar to that of the Bray sisters, the Shattuck sisters dwelling indicates their social and physical state in society:

So ancient was the little habitation, so wavering and mouldering ... that it almost seemed to have fallen below its distinctive rank as a house. Rain and snow had filtered through its roof, mosses had grown over it, worms had eaten it, and birds built their nests under its eaves, nature had almost completely overrun and obliterated the work of man, a taken her own to herself again, till the house seemed as much a natural ruin as an old tree stump.

(144)

Interestingly, the house has succumbed to the effects of age as have its inhabitants. The natural ruin of both the house and the sisters further pushes the deformed figures from the realms of the normal. With no outside assistance, the Shattucks are left to their own devices, and, while times were hard, “the patched roof had been kept over their heads, the coarse, hearty food that they loved had been set on their table, and their cheap clothes had been warm and strong ... it could not be said that they actually suffered” (144-145). While the Shattucks’ home may not be the most appealing structure to look at for “the whole house ... had an air of settling down and mouldering into the grass” (143), the rooted position of the house mirrors the comfort and acceptance the sisters have not only with their disabilities but also with their position in society.

Additionally, the sisters root their livelihood in the earth that surrounds their home, similar to the way that the house has settled into the earth. The two sisters earn their income,

which is very meager considering all of their doctor's bills, and find their delight through their garden. The joy that they receive from their pumpkins, apples, and currants not only contributed to their living, but was also something that was "their own, their private share of the great wealth of nature, the little taste set apart for them alone out of her bounty, and worth more to them on that account" (145). The pride that the two sisters take in their garden and the ability to be self-sufficient makes their produce more special than anything that society tries to "generously" impose on them.

Though the proceeds they receive from bartering with their neighbors is helpful, it is their ability to care for themselves that brings the most satisfaction. This demonstrates what Susan Allen Toth describes as Freeman's "surprisingly modern and complex sense of the constant mutual adjustment necessary between individual and community, between need for independence and social insistence on conformity, between private fulfillment and social duties" (123). The two women sell their produce to neighbors and other members of the community because they do not want their independence to be overshadowed by their disabilities. When their neighbor, Mrs. Simonds, comes to visit and brings the two sisters doughnuts, Harriet immediately notes that they are tough. When the visiting neighbor comments on the decrepit state of the sisters' home, Harriet is quick to remark that the house will last as long as they do.

Though seemingly ungrateful and rude to their visitor, Harriet is defending their independence. Charlotte, who is in the dark both figuratively and literally, does not understand why her sister is so dismissive of Mrs. Simonds' kindness, even asking why she had to mention the toughness of the doughnuts. Harriet, however, doesn't want the town's charity:

Charlotte, do you want everybody to look down on us, an' think we ain't no account at all, just like beggars, 'cause they bring us in vittles ... If I don't kinder keep up an' show

some sperrit, I shan't think nothing of myself, an' other folks won't nuther, and fust thing we know they'll kerry us to the poor house. (147)

While Charlotte is meekly convinced by her sister's statement, she is still more optimistic about the generosity of the community. Despite her blindness, she describes the events of the morning and through the "chinks," which are described small ray of light that comes through a little peep hole that she did not know was there earlier in the day. For Charlotte, the concern of the community is able to cut through the darkness of her life, even if only for a minute, which is something she wishes her sister could understand.

However, the charity that Charlotte so appreciates eventually takes away the independence of the Shattuck sisters. Mrs. Simonds, after leaving the sisters' home goes straight to her friend (known only as "the widow") to devise a plan to move the Shattuck sisters. While Mrs. Simonds is described as a woman who is "bent on doing good, and she did a great deal ... [and] she always did it in her own way" (147), the widow is presented as "a rich and childless elderly widow" who "was hand in glove with officers of missionary boards and trustees of charitable institutions" (147). The two women decide to enter into a partnership of good deeds, the widow providing the money and Mrs. Simonds devising the "active schemes of benevolence" (147) in order to secure the Shattuck sisters a place in the home. Despite the sisters firmly rejecting of the offer, they are unable to sway Mrs. Simonds from her plan. After weeks of fighting, the Shattuck sisters finally give in, locking up the house and following the "do-gooders" to their new "home."

What is interesting, however, is that Mrs. Simond's husband speaks out against his wife's charity thinking "it was a shame" (147) to take these two sisters' from their home. However, this does not stop him from helping the Shattuck sisters load their trunks into the

wagon and taking them away from their independent life. Mrs. Simond, here, holds the power in the situation because she has brought the men into the situation. Because her husband never says anything to her or to anyone else about this benevolent act, Mrs. Simond is left to her own devices to do as she chooses in regards to “helping” those in need. In bringing the men in to their scheme either through money or through the veil of “helping” these disabled women, charitable women are able to assert themselves in the public sphere and established a position of dominance. They are so consumed with doing the “right” thing that they do not notice that “the two poor old women looked like two forlorn prisoners ... [which] was an impressive illustration of the truth of the saying that ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’” (147). This act of “helping” in Freeman’s work indicates the selfish and self-aggrandizing nature of community charity.

The “benevolent” act, however, does not keep the Shattucks down long, which is a familiar situation in many of Freeman’s stories, in which “the old must fight for their survival with all their strength, a strength fortunately dependent on character rather than physical heartiness” (Toth 124). The two women, though being treated well enough cannot adapt to life in the “home”:

The fare was finer, more delicately served variety than they had been accustomed to ... Then they had to be more particular about their dress. They had always been tidy enough, but now it had to be something more; the widow in the kindness of her heart, had made it possible, and the good folks in charge of the “Home,” in the kindness of their hearts, tried to carry out the widow’s designs. But nothing could transform these two unpolished women into two nice old ladies ... They had always worn calico with long aprons at home, and they wanted to now; and they wanted to twist up their scanty gray locks into



little knots on the back of their heads, and go without caps, just as they always had done.  
(149).

The pressure that the two sisters experience in the home to conform to what “nice old ladies” are supposed to be further solidifies how different Charlotte and Harriet are from the rest of the community. Instead of drawing the Shattucks in to what should be a better way, of life the situation leads to a worsening of their disabilities, especially Charlotte’s.

While Harriet does not speak much after leaving their home, Charlotte becomes more vocal about her discomfort and the darkness that seems to be consuming her. On multiple occasions, Charlotte tells her sister that if they could just go back to the way things were before, especially in regards to the food that the sisters grew and cooked themselves, then “the light would stream in” (149). Charlotte has also been so oppressed that she feels that she cannot even say “O Lord” without receiving disfavor from the people of the home. The drastic change in lifestyle has stripped away their identity. Despite Mrs. Simond’s and the widow’s “good intent,” they have cast the Shattucks into a world of darkness.

After two months, Charlotte finally breaks and speaks to her sister about leaving the home:

This here ain’t good; I want merlasses fur sweetening. Can’t we get back no ways, Harriet? It ain’t far, an’ we could walk, an’ they don’t lock us in, nor nothin’. I do’t want to die here; it ain’t so straight up to heaven from here. O Lord, I’ve felt as if I was slantendicular from heaven ever since I’ve been here, an’ it’s been so awful dark. I ain’t had any chinks. I want to go home, Harriet. (149)

No matter how simple, the daily pleasures brought a small stream of light through Charlotte’s usually dark vision. The dire situation initiates Charlotte and Harriet’s “positive drive towards

fulfillment that motivates [Freeman's] strong characters, a fulfillment of what they believe to be their own true selves. They do not fight simply for their ideas but for their independence; they demand, quite simply, a measure of individual freedom" (Toth 128). No longer able to stand their oppressed state, the two sisters form a plan to leave, placing their caps on the bedpost so that their caretakers would think they are still there. With a new determination, the two women set off to travel home, despite the 14-mile journey that lies before them.

The Shattuck sisters do not let the distance intimidate them; rather, they hobble along, "holding each other's hands, as jubilant as two children, and chuckling to themselves over their escape, and the probable astonishment there would be in the "Home" over it" (150). However, to avoid any possible suspicion as they walk through the community,

Harriet held her bristling chin high in the air, and hobbled along with an appearance of being well aware of what she was about, that led folks to doubt their own first opinion that there was something unusual about the two women. (150)

Because of their confidence, and a slight fib about visiting Harriet's non-existent daughter, the Shattucks are able to get a ride home from a man in a covered wagon and who, unknowingly, hides them from the caretakers of the home who are out looking for them. It only takes a few hours for the sisters to successfully make it back to their true home and, ultimately, their true selves. Not only are they able to turn the key and return to their lives, their independence, and their particular version of normality.

The ability to find their own confidence and escape those who wanted to "help" them allows the sisters to triumph over their disabilities. Charlotte, who for two months sat in darkness, now experiences the best vision she had in years: "I do believe I saw one of them yaller butterflies go past it ... thar is so many chinks that they air all runnin' together!" (151).

Though the most disabled of the two sisters, Charlotte's decision to throw off the "charity" of society allows her to emerge from the darkness that defined her life for so long and, with a new-found vigor, fight for the independence and freedom that she needs.

While many marginalized characters try to fit into society, the Shattuck sisters refuse to conform. Instead, they root their identity in their outcast status. Rather than presenting charity as helpful, Freeman shows the harm that unwanted charity can inflict on those who are capable of caring for themselves. Freeman "offers hope for those characters, especially women, who display the inner strength to reject the code, even if that rejection can be accomplished only from the margins of the social order" (Pennell 220). The newly returned (partial) vision of Charlotte and Harriet's confidence to journey through town despite the onlookers starkly contrasts the ending state of both Davis and Jewett's deformed and disabled characters. Ultimately, society's attempt to normalize differences cripples and stifles the disabled even more than they already are. It is only through the act of accepting one's self and, as Freeman points out, rejecting society's standards that the disabled are truly able to be independent.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: The Disabled Reality

In *The Nineteenth-Century Woman*, Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin say that “anomalies [can] be seen as highly dangerous things. By labelling an anomaly as a social danger, conformity can be enforced by insisting that peril will result from association” (15). In marking the deformed as different, society comes to see them as anomalies that threaten community stability. In addition, “normal” people who associate with these “deviants” become deviant themselves. In attempt to combat this potential disruption, social conformity in appearance and action becomes the accepted norm. As demonstrated through the three works discussed here, this danger can be a danger to one’s self, as in Davis’ work, a danger caused by society’s charitable acts or a danger to the community’s image, as in Jewett’s work, or a perceived but non-existent danger, as in Freeman’s work. In all three of these stories, fixing the imagined “anomaly” –becomes a moral imperative for the “able” bodied community members.

Rather than viewing the disability as something natural, society characterizes people with disabilities as pitiful, unhealthy, dependent, and in need of rescue. As Thomson puts it, the “traditional conceptualization of the disabled body [is seen] as deficient and in need of reconstruction or ‘improvement’” (593). However, the authors discussed here argue that the deformity is actually exacerbated by the marginalized and debilitating positions of the female characters. The physical disabilities force the disabled women into an abnormal and therefore dependent position that calls for immediate action by the abled women of the community. These moral duties fell to women most often, since the men were busy working. Because of this new-found moral obligation, women of means pushed their way into the lives of the disabled figures to improve, they thought, their situations. However, society’s need to “help” these disabled

women creates a more oppressive situation for them. Though some charitable women believe that they are helping these deformed/disabled women, others tend to act out their own selfish motives, only doing good in order to be *seen* as doing good.

Overall, the disabled/deformed women in Davis, Jewett, and Freeman showcase a conflict between individual identity and social conformity. If an individual does not possess what is considered to be an able body, then she is pitied, cast out, or forcibly made to appear normal. Goodley notes that “when bodies do break down, when they seem to offer us access to the real, when we think we can say, ‘there is disabled, there is dependent, there is illness, there is a lacking body,’ the symbolic quickly enters the fray and significance takes over” (135). Unfortunately, the “charitable” women in Davis, Jewett, and Freeman do not see this reality. Instead, they force their way into the roles of “do-gooder” and social activist in order to pull these women from their “unfortunate” states. While some of the disabled woman, such as Deb and the Bray sisters, are in a complete state of disarray, they are never given the opportunity to make their own decisions. However, the Bray sisters, like the Shattuck sisters and unlike Deb, attempt to make the best of their situation without help from the society that caused their troubles in the first place. Freeman’s Shattuck sisters, on the other hand, show that independent disabled women are capable of defining themselves and creating a different reality – one where not everybody has to be socially “normal.”

Instead of accepting that the disabled/deformed are able to establish their own independence, 19<sup>th</sup>-century American society wanted to mold them in the same way the Industrial Revolution was molding the mechanical and urbanized future of the country. Significantly, it is not just disabled and deformed individuals who face society’s unrealistic expectations. Godley states that

The tragedy is that non/disabled people do not recognize that we all share the experience of alienation and that different bodies, whether female, queer/normative, black/white, all, to varying extents, are destined to fail to meet the demands of the symbolic. (134)

Alienation and marginalization do not occur just for those who look different, but they can be experienced at some point by most people who try and fail to be “normal.”

Rather than further marginalizing their characters, Davis, Jewett, and Freeman switch the perspective from the disabled women to society’s normalizing attempts. In doing so, these disabled women are presented as individuals who, as often as not, have no need of society’s “help.” Additionally, the realities that the charitable women experience mimic those of the disabled. Despite their efforts to help those they deem in need, they also are victim to societal expectations. Reality, as Quayson notes, can be presented in different refractions based on who is telling/creating the story. For most of history, women, especially disabled women, have been unable to form their own independent identities outside of the social norms they have been preventing from telling their own stories. While the situation for women in general has become better over the years, disabled individuals are still confronted by a society that wants to “help” them: wants to “fix” them in order for them to lead better lives. Disabled individuals, even today, face social pressure to conform, which increases in severity based on the type of disability a person has. Rather than allowing society to create their identity, disabled people, like the characters discussed in this thesis, fight to create their own images of “normal” and their own versions of happy lives.

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