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## **The Treatment of Disability in 19th and Early 20th Century Children's Literature**

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The classics of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century children's fiction contain many characters with disabilities: for example, Clara in Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1872); Katy and Cousin Helen in Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872)\*; Colin in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911)\*; Pollyanna in Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* (1911)\* and Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) (not strictly speaking a children's book, but often treated as one).

There are of course also many disabled characters in children's books that are currently less well-known and/or less available to children: books by such authors as Charlotte Yonge, Annie Keary, Harriet Martineau, Talbot Baines Reed and Dinah Mulock (Mrs. Craik).

The received wisdom on the part of most recent commentators on earlier children's books is that disabled characters in books published before the time of the First World War are usually two-dimensional stereotypes. They are sometimes villains, especially in books predominantly intended for adults, and in some fantasies (e.g. Captain Hook in J.M. Barrie's "Peter Pan"; originally *Peter and Wendy*, 1911). More often they are saintly invalids, either to begin with, or because their experience of disability has reformed them. Most of these saintly or reformed invalids are girls. They rarely become disabled adults: either they die young, or experience a miracle cure.

This description certainly does fit some early children's books. However, certain differences exist between the treatment of disabled characters in the "children's classics" and books that are out-of-print or less available to children. Treatment of disabled characters is often more complex and varied in the latter than in the former.

In early books as a whole, exact physical nature and cause of the disability is often unclear. It is clearest in two cases where children have to undergo the amputation of a foot: In Martineau's *The Crofton Boys* (1841), Hugh Proctor's foot is crushed in an accident, while Geraldine Underwood in Yonge's *The Pillars of the House* (1873) undergoes this drastic surgery to cure her of a serious illness, presumably tuberculosis of the bone. In most cases, however, the characters are either simply described as "lame", or have experienced some form of unspecified accidental injury to the spine. Where some medical explanation is attempted, the emphasis is on "inflammation" of the injured area. It is perhaps not appropriate, however, even to attempt to interpret most of these stories in terms of medical realism. The lack of medical specificity in these books has the effect of facilitating highly improbable and stylized treatment of disability. On the other hand, it prevents the reduction of a disabled character to a specific medical condition.

In many books, disability, where it occurs, and its cure are associated with character. Cure may result directly from a healthier attitude to life, often

character. Cure may result directly from a healthier attitude to life, often implying a voluntary relinquishment of the disabled role. Colin in Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911)\* has been emotionally neglected, and has spent his entire childhood indoors, convinced by servants and a doctor that he is destined to be a hunchback like his father and to die young. Colin is ultimately cured by the combination of healthy friendships with Mary and Dickon; exposure to the healing effects of nature and the outdoors; and becoming convinced that he is in fact healthy and will "live forever and ever". In Colin's case, it becomes clear to the reader that his illness is hysterical: due to emotional rather than physical causes. However, in some books the effects of a clearly physical injury are cured by will power, as when Johanna Spyri's Clara (in *Heidi*, 1872) finds that she is able to walk once Peter (in intended malice) has pushed her wheelchair off the cliff.

More commonly, disability is not cured purely by a change of heart, but *is* a means of spiritual discipline (see Lois Keith's recent book, *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk*, 2001). A headstrong child, often a tomboyish girl, is injured, often through recklessness or disobedience, and learns discipline through weeks or months of suffering and relative immobility. The best-known example is that of Katy in *What Katy Did* (1872)\*; Cousin Helen, permanently disabled by an accident some years earlier, tells Katy that God has allowed her (like Helen herself) to study in the "School of Pain", where she can learn lessons in "Patience" and "Making the Best of Things", and become the "Heart of the House". A somewhat similar theme occurs in several other books, such as Alcott's *Jack and Jill* (1879)\* ("This painful little back will be a sort of conscience to remind you of what you ought to do and leave undone, and so you can be learning obedience") and in Hart's *Daisy's Dilemmas* (1900). In Porter's *Pollyanna* (1911)\*, temporary disability is not seen as discipline for Pollyanna herself (she is already good) but for her aunt and various friends and neighbours.

Some permanently disabled characters in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century children's books are "saintly invalids", whose chief role seems to be to set an example for others. Examples include Tiny Tim in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Carol in Wiggin's *The Birds' Christmas Carol* (1891)\*, Dick in Alcott's *Little Men* (1871)\*, and Lucinda Snow, whose story is told as an inspiration to Jill in Alcott's *Jack and Jill* (1879)\*. Lucinda, although, or perhaps because, we never actually meet her (she has presumably died some time before the story begins), is a particularly clear exemplar of the type. She had been "bedridden" for life as a

result of a fall as a young girl, and Mrs. Minot tells her story as an inspiration to Jill who is also unable to walk due to a back injury (though in the end she recovers): "This Lucinda I knew for years, and though at first I thought her fate the saddest that could be, I came at last to see how happy she was despite her affliction, how good and useful and beloved ... She was so patient, other people were ashamed to complain of their small worries; so cheerful that her own great one grew lighter; so industrious that she made both friends and money by pretty things she worked... And best of all, so wise and sweet that she seemed to get good out of everything, and make her room a sort of chapel where people went for comfort, counsel and an example of a pious life."

However, examining the role of disabled characters in early children's books reveals a more complex picture. Firstly, the School of Pain is co-educational. Boys as well as girls grow, learn and become disciplined through suffering. Hugh in *The Crofton Boys* (1841) and Leonard in Ewing's *The Story of a Short Life* (1885) are outstanding examples of learning control of temper and cheerfulness. Ferdy in Molesworth's *The Oriel Window* (1896), whose temper is already controlled, uses his period of suffering to learn to perform "good works" in the community.

The main difference between the treatment of girls and boys is that there is more stress on girls learning to be useful to their families, and on boys developing and demonstrating courage: a difference not, of course, confined to books featuring disabled characters. In Ewing's *The Story of a Short Life* (1885), Leonard at first reacts to the pain and disability caused by his spinal injury by being peevish and irritable, sometimes to the point of physical violence, beating a servant with his crutch. However, he comes to bear his pain bravely, partly through the exhortations of his mother, who tells him that though he may not become a brave soldier, he can be "a brave cripple." The message is very much that of Ewing's verse story *Convalescence* (1883): "The courage that dares and the courage that bears are really one and the same".

Secondly, the School of Pain is not confined to disability, the treatment of which must be seen in the broader context of the ways in which misfortunes were often treated as bestowed by God for the ultimate good of the individual. It is frequently emphasized in 19<sup>th</sup> century children's literature that seeming misfortunes must be accepted as part of a higher plan: an attitude starkly expressed in "Rabbits' Tails", a short story in Gatty's *Aunt Judy's Tales* (1859),

where the narrator says of two young orphans: "Had it indeed been right for the children that their mother should have lived, she would not have been taken away". The same book includes the tale of "Grandmamma's Throat", which is about illness rather than disability in the usual sense. Grandmamma in the end lives to be at least 90 in reasonable health, but her childhood and youth were overshadowed and restricted by throat trouble. She suffered not only from attacks of actual pain and illness, but from the limitations on her life caused by the need to go to bed early, avoid going out in bad weather, and avoid even mental exertion. The central point of the story is that "of our being often led by the Almighty in the way *we* think *least good for us*, as well as least like ourselves; of our characters being formed as He would have them, by the very circumstances which seem of themselves a bar to any improvement at all; of our even being made most useful to others, when every power of usefulness seems taken away". Even a baby's sufferings may be seen as spiritual discipline. In Yonge's *Heartsease* (1854), the young mother of a delicate premature baby is comforted by her brother-in-law: "One who loves him better than even you do... may be disciplining him for future life, or fitting him for brighter glory."

Thus, the prevailing view of 19<sup>th</sup> century authors was that one should submit to misfortunes, both as a form of obedience to God's will, and because these seeming misfortunes are ultimately intended for one's own good. In early Victorian books, especially, this attitude can guide characters' behaviour to a quite extreme degree. In Yonge's *The Two Guardians* (1852) Marian is not sure whether she really needs to have a tooth extracted, but decides to do so on the grounds that "Self-denial is always best, and in a doubtful case the most disagreeable is always the safest."

This emphasis on submission to the will of God applies to *all* characters, and applies to a whole range of circumstances: not only disability. The need for such submission is certainly a strong feature of the treatment of disabled characters, but it does not set them apart from others: Their non-disabled friends and siblings must also submit to the will of God. In Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Margaret must submit to invalidism and loss of her hopes for marriage, but her sister Ethel also renounces any hope of marriage, as well as learning the discipline imposed by her sex: lack of intellectual fulfillment and the performance of uncongenial ladylike duties. Their sister, Flora, too secure in her self-esteem, must learn spiritual discipline through even worse suffering when

her baby dies through mismanagement by the nanny to whom Flora had left her care.

Thirdly, disabled characters are not always treated as helpless pitiable creatures or as saintly invalids. The School of Pain is not only co-educational but also comprehensive! Some disabled characters are in fact defined more by other characteristics, such as special talents, than by their disabilities. Geraldine Underwood in Yonge's *The Pillars of the House* (1873) and Ermine Williams in the same author's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), though in many ways quite different in character, are both intelligent sensitive women with high talents: artistic in Geraldine's case and literary in Ermine's. Their creative talents, and associated emotional sensitivity, are seen as more crucial aspects of their characters than their disabilities. The "lame" boy Tony Pembury in Reed's *Fifth Form at St Dominic's* (1887) is a clever, witty, often sarcastic boy who uses his verbal skills to gain influence and power in the schoolboy world.

Disabled characters are also quite capable of having human failings. Though the hero of Keary's *Sidney Grey* (1857) is very much in the saintly-invalid class, Keary also describes several far more complex disabled characters. For example, Louis, in Keary's *Mia and Charlie* (1856), is portrayed as clever, brave and resourceful but short-tempered and irritable; and the bailiff's daughter in the same author's *Father Phim* (1875) is almost as unpleasant and ill-tempered as her (non-disabled) father, but can at times be affectionate. Daisy in Hart's *Daisy's Dilemmas* (1900) is not only headstrong and wild, but spoilt, selfish and in many ways a bully. In many ways this is a "School of Pain" story, but Daisy's spinal injury does not in itself reform her, so much as her increasing awareness of the kindness of people whom she had previously mistreated.

Fourthly, the disabled characters do not invariably either get cured or die. Many are only partially cured, or survive with an unchanged mild or severe disability, which in many cases does not prevent them from leading interesting lives and pursuing careers. For instance, Reed's Tony Pembury's lameness does not prevent him from being the editor of a national journal, and "everyone wants to be on good terms with an editor." Martineau's Hugh Proctor's loss of a foot means that he cannot become a soldier or sailor, but he still achieves his original ambition to "go round the world" by joining the Indian Civil Service. Most impressive of all is the outcome for Dinah Mulock's *Little Lambe Prince and His*

*Travelling Cloak* (1875), a somewhat allegorical fantasy with a fairly realistic ending. The prince defeats his own and his country's enemies and is restored to the throne. His lameness is "never cured", but does not prevent him from being a greatly respected and successful King, establishing many important reforms, including the abolition of the death penalty.

Thus, the treatment of disability in 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century children's literature is more complex than it appears at first sight. Although disability was indeed sometimes seen, like all misfortunes and hardships, as providing spiritual discipline, disabled characters were not always completely transformed into stereotypical "saintly invalids". Partly this may reflect variations across time and place, or in the personalities of the writers and their own direct or vicarious experience of disability. The same author may deal very differently with disabled characters in different books.

It is interesting that the portrayal of disabled characters as saintly invalids, or as headstrong girls being tamed through the discipline of suffering, seems more prevalent in the surviving books than in those long out-of-print. Nineteenth century books currently in print reflect not only the attitudes of the authors and of 19th century readers, but also those of the later readers who have kept them in print. The saintly invalid and the tamed headstrong girl may, after all, have been demanded as much or more by the mid- and late- 20th century reader than by the 19th century reader.

Explanations for this phenomenon must be tentative, but at least two possible reasons may be considered. One is that what began as religious or social themes in 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction were often borrowed by later authors for their sentimental value. One parallel example, taking place somewhat earlier, concerns the deathbed and near-deathbed scenes that were used for religious purposes in pre-Victorian and early Victorian books, but were seemingly borrowed by some later Victorian writers mainly as a means of drawing tears (see Avery, 1965). Another concerns the stories of slum life and poverty, which mid-Victorian writers from Charles Dickens to Hesba Stretton had used to expose social and moral evils, but which some later writers appeared to use for far more purely sentimental purposes (Bratton, 1981). In such cases, the broader context in which the specific theme had been embedded ceases to exist; and the theme, isolated from its context, may become almost a caricature of its original self.

The other reason may concern attitudes to disability as such. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, permanent and temporary disabilities were common and may have differed only subtly from the frequent ill health experienced by many people. Although disabled people in all periods have often been treated suspiciously or condescendingly as "different", disability in the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have been seen as more part of the "common condition" than at a later stage. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, disabilities may have been seen as more treatable and preventable, at least in young people; moreover it was seen as more appropriate -- or at least more possible - to consign people with disabilities to institutions. Thus, disabled characters may have been seen as more rare and more "abnormal": requiring either unusual saintliness or a miracle cure to justify their presence.

\*Asterisked books are by American authors, (or, in the case of Frances Hodgson Burnett, long-term residents of the United States).

*Note:* Although this article divides books into the "children's classics" and the currently less well known, such distinctions can only be approximate. Some books that are not current "children's classics" are in fact in print, but for an almost exclusively adult readership (e.g. some books by Charlotte Yonge; and some though now out-of-print, were reprinted in relatively late "revival" editions (e.g. *The Fifth Form at St. Dominics'* in 1971). Most interestingly, perhaps, Picture Lions published Rosemary Wells' new version of *The Little Lame Prince* in 1992. The basic plot is somewhat similar, but the book is now a much shorter *picture book* for young children; the wording is almost completely different; and furry animals have replaced the human characters.

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