“Poor girl!”: Feminism, Disability and the Other in *Ulysses*
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that I never questioned and never intend to. Thank you for constantly inspiring me to do
my very best and always giving me a reason to ‘keep my head up.’

Disabled women often do not feel seen (because they are often not seen) by others as
whole people, especially not as sexual people.¹

His dark eyes fixed themselves on her again, drinking in her every contour, literally
worshipping at her shrine. If ever there was undisguised admiration in a man’s
passionate gaze it was there plain to be seen on that man’s face. It is for you, Gertrude
MacDowell, and you know it. ⁰¹³. 563-67²

BEAUTY AND ITS VARIATIONS

I want to break your bones. Make them so
they look like mine. Force you to walk on
twisted legs. Then, will your lips still beg
for mine? Or will that disturb the balance
of our desire? Even as it inspires, your body
terrifies. And once again I find your hands
inside me. Why do you touch my scars? You
can’t make them beautiful any more than I can
tear your skin apart. Beneath my scars,
between my twisted bones, hides my heart.

Why don’t you let me leave my mark? With no
Flaws on your skin—how can I find your heart?³

Kenny Fries

She’s lame! O! Mr Bloom watched her as she limped away. Poor girl! …Hot little devil
all the same. I wouldn’t mind. Curiosity like a nun or a negress or a girl with glasses.
U 13.771-77

cited parenthetically.
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I. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine Gerty MacDowell in “Nausicaa,” Chapter 13 of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and how her overwhelming femininity affects her disability, and how that conflation of femininity and disability largely engages feminist disability theory. Gerty MacDowell prides herself on the active sexualizing of her own body. In selling her body as a commodity, she receives the desired gaze of the outside world through Bloom. For Gerty wants someone to desire her—rather, she needs someone to desire her. Gerty is a self-created fetish-object. In producing her image of impeccable femininity she is able to objectify her own body. She needs to be seen by others as a commoditized image because that is the only way she is comfortable seeing and knowing herself. Gerty MacDowell, however, is only a fetish-object until her disability is realized. Her disability humanizes her; she needs her disability more than she realizes. In the interaction between Bloom and Gerty, disability is recognized textually as her link to humanity. In recognizing Gerty’s disability, Bloom is able to recognize as well as reflect on his own “disabilities”—albeit figurative—but still very integral in the way he views himself. By recognizing that disabilities are part of all human lives, *Ulysses* promotes a theory of disability studies that is extremely positive and helps to break down the stigmatizing of the disabled.

Specifically, the theory that helps situate the textual analysis of Bloom and Gerty’s interaction is that of feminist disability theory. There are many parallels that exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. They are both cast within a cultural discourse that deems them deviant.
Lennard Davis writes, “without the monstrous body to demarcate the borders of the
generic, without the female body to distinguish the shape of the male, and without the
pathological to give form to the normal, these taxonomies of bodily value that underwrite
political, social and economic arrangements would collapse.” Placing disability studies
in a feminist context allows feminist theory’s recent questioning of the body’s role in
identity and selfhood to shed light on disability theory. Applying feminist theory to
disability theory helps infuse the feminist’s politicized insistence on the relationship
between the meanings attributed to bodies by cultural representation and the consequence
of those meanings. Although feminism has complex and conflicting aims in rewriting the
category of woman as well as in politicizing the materiality of bodies, feminist thinking is
helpful in terms of what it brings to disability theory. For Gerty to excite male desire and
to sustain the lasting effects even after her disability is recognized is crucial in attempting
to form a new way of thinking about the sexuality of the disabled. Nancy Mairs, a
disability novelist with multiple sclerosis, says that through the many years she has lived
with her disease, “Not one of my doctors…has ever asked me about my sex life.” The
depiction of Gerty, then, as a purely sexual object constructed on her on terms is integral
in subverting the notion that Mairs speaks to—the association of disability with the
asexual.

More important than Gerty’s purely sexualized image, however, is the fact that it is
her disability that allows Bloom to recognize her as a human being. Constructing
disability as a means to entering into the human is a positive step for the disability

\[4\] Davis, 280.
culture. Disability is primarily thought of as something that able-bodied people fear. As Susan Wendell writes, “The disabled are not only de-valued for their de-valued bodies, they are constant reminders to the able-bodied of the negative body—of what the able-bodies are trying to avoid, forget and ignore.”

Although some able-bodied people feel similarly about disabled people, “I make her “other” because I don’t want to confront my real body, which I fear and cannot accept” (Wendell, 280), this is not the case for Bloom in response to Gerty. After his recognition of her lameness, his first words are, “Poor girl!” (U, 13.772) This is the first time that Bloom has spoken about Gerty in those kinds of humanizing terms—rather than as the idealized “fair unsullied soul.” Through this exclamation, he treats her empathetically (as a human) rather than a sexualized object.

This exploration of disability is structured by a feminist disability theory that presents disability as something that is everywhere and happens to everyone. This textual recognition of disability proposes that our bodies are constantly changing. In reality, human bodies are extremely diverse—in size, shape, texture, function, and development. Defining disability as something that happens within each and every person’s life is an attempt to dislodge it from becoming the “other.” As Susan Wendell stipulates,

> We need an understanding of disability that does not support a paradigm of humanity as young and healthy. Encouraging everyone to acknowledge, accommodate and identify with a wide range of physical conditions is ultimately the road of self-acceptance as well as the road to liberating those who are disabled now.

Recognizing this simple fact will help the world of the non-disabled to see that disabled people are not “other” but, rather, part of “us.”

In the first section I will closely examine the make-up of Gerty MacDowell and how important her mental and emotional background are in creating her as an object awaiting

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7 Wendell, 263.
fetishization. Gerty thrives on wearing the apparently secure mask of femininity, and although she does a very good job at it, it is a mask that leaves room for discovery. Through her detailed description of her physical maintenance paired with her romanticized language she voices her concerns about hiding her disability. The words “doing herself up” is a linguistic microcosm of Gerty’s commoditization of her image. This fluid and romanticized language is a means for Gerty to veil her disability with language. Femininity and disability are far from mutually exclusive. Femininity and disability are, in fact, inextricably entangled. Not only has the female body been thought of as deviant similar to the disabled body, but there have been historic practices of femininity that have configured female bodies in ways that duplicate the parameters of disability. These include practices such as Chinese foot binding, clitoridectomy, African scarification, Euro-American corsetings, and modern-day restrictive eating disorders. It is important to identify that through this forced disabling, a woman’s value would, in fact, increase. For Gerty, however, there is a distinct difference between the necessary disabling she does to herself in order to promote her femininity, and between her unspeakable “shortcoming.”

In her self-construction, Gerty’s thoughts and feelings emerge in relation to the other two girls she is around—Cissy and Edie. In the second section I will explore how these three girls set up a sort of exhibition for Bloom, but more specifically focus on how Gerty thinks about the two other non-disabled girls. The “seaside girl” is a classification that Cissy and Edie easily fall into, whereas Gerty can not be a part of that group. Bloom says, “Those girls, those girls, those lovely seaside girls” (U, 13.906) in thinking about Gerty, but the song he references speaks to a group of girls who are irresistible but
seemingly one and the same. Gerty, however, is different. She is forced out of that “seaside girl” category because of her one difference. It is important to see how, in light of this exclusion, she counteracts the other female competition.

In the third section, I will elaborate on the mutual masturbation that takes place between Bloom and Gerty in which Gerty is able to secure an erotic victory over Bloom. Although it has been argued that Bloom voyeuristically rapes Gerty, I will argue otherwise. Bloom climaxes in a physical way that Gerty, explicitly at least, does not, but they both reach a desired culmination. Gerty is very much aware of the masturbation that is taking place and, more so than that, she delights in it. Gerty takes pleasure in knowing that she is evoking male pleasure. The most crucial part in regards to this masturbation scene is Bloom’s recognition of Gerty’s disability. Although there is slight hesitation in his accepting of her disability, he ultimately allows for a construction of Gerty as an actual human being rather than some sort of pleasurable fantasy. Even in light of this recognition, however, her disability does not usurp the pleasure Bloom is able to have in the interaction between the two. Bloom conclusively says, “still it was kind of language between us” (U. 13.944) and her disability does not in any way mar the syntax of that bodily gesture contrived as language.

The final section will deal with Gerty’s reappearance in “Circe” Chapter 15 and how this fantasy figure which exaggerates her disability affects Gerty and Bloom, as well as what it says for the text as a whole. Specifically, Gerty’s disability lingers through the text after her exchange with Bloom. Although her disability humanizes her, it is also the

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source of extreme fixation on Bloom’s part. This fixation speaks to Joyce’s insecurity as well. Although disability is used as a humanizing tool, the inability to discard the notion of disability argues for “narrative prosthesis”\textsuperscript{9}—Gerty’s disability is necessary for the text to continue. Beyond continuing the text, Gerty’s disability helps further an argument relating not to disability, but rather to human imperfection. We come into contact with many transgressions on the part of the characters, and Gerty’s disability reminds the narrative that “disabilities/mistakes/transgressions” are part of what it is to be human. This is an integral tenet of the novel as a whole, produced by the novel’s reliance on Gerty’s disability as a sort of “crutch”\textsuperscript{10} to carry it along successfully.

I. “A daintier head of nutbrown tresses was never seen on a girl’s shoulders”: Gerty MacDowell’s Impeccable Feminine Make-up

From the very beginning of “Nausicaa,” Gerty MacDowell is presented in a light that emphasizes her meticulous upkeep as well as her concern regarding her physical appearance. Within the first few lines of her introduction, there is a mention of “iron jelloids” (\textit{U}, 13.84) that she has been taking which had apparently done a much better job at making her “discharges” more manageable. She is described as having an “almost spiritual” (\textit{U}, 13.87) face. Her skin is flawless and white. There is a hint of this anxiety about her fixation on her seemingly flawless appearance when she addresses the false rumor that has circulated in the past: “it was not true that she used to wear kid gloves in bed or take a milk footbath either. Bertha Supple told that once to Edy Boardman, a deliberate lie” (\textit{U}, 13.91-93). The narration in this chapter is integral in also gaining a


\textsuperscript{10} Mitchell, 16.
deeper understanding of Gerty. It is important to recognize that the seemingly objective third person voice uses the language that Gerty would to describe herself. In other words, there is seamlessness between the objective narration and Gerty’s own self-narration. Thus the sentimentality that permeates the chapter through Gerty’s own self-narration is dual: both subjective evaluation and objective reality. As Thomas Karr Richard writes, “Joyce...stresses not only Gerty’s immersions in a prefabricated language, but the ability of that language to fulfill diverse and even contradictory social and psychological needs.”¹¹ The ironic moments of the sentimentality allows for a double vision of Gerty—she is both genuine and a parody of the conventions of femininity.

There seems to be an anxiety about promoting this air of beauty for Gerty MacDowell, although she does it quite successfully: “There was an innate refinement, a languid queenly hauteur about Gerty which was unmistakably evidenced in her delicate hands and higharched instep” (U, 13.97-98). Gerty’s comparison to a queen in terms of her physical refinement, suggests an unmatched femininity. But is it her “high-arched instep” which is in question. This allusion calls attention to just as it obscures her defect. This emphasis on the delicate yet reserved persona that Gerty exudes, comes across as a strong sense of unmatched femininity:

Gerty MacDowell might easily have held her own beside any lady in the land and have seen herself exquisitely gowned with jewels on her brow and patrician suitors at her feet vying with one another to pay their devoirs to her. Mayhap it was this, the love that might have been, that lent to her softly featured face at whiles a look, tense with suppressed meaning, that imparted a strange yearning tendency to the beautiful eyes, a charm few could resist (U, 13.100-107).

Gerty’s beautiful face surpasses the beauty of other women, yet there is something below the surface that Gerty attempts to hide: her limp.

There is no doubt that Gerty MacDowell is an icon of beauty, “Gerty’s [eyes] were of the bluest Irish blue, set off by lustrous lashes and dark expressive brows,” (U, 13.107-8) and that this beauty infuses a sense of power in her own self-image. The power that lies within grasp of Gerty’s beauty is one compared to a sort of magical witchery. Before speaking of Gerty’s disarmingly beautiful eyes, he writes, “Why have women such eyes of witchery?” (U, 13.107) The narrator combines his sentimental nationalism with Gerty’s unparalleled beauty through his description of how she even surpasses the depth of beauty Ireland holds, “God’s fair land of Ireland did not hold her equal” (U, 13.122). Moreover, this beauty does not come without extreme effort on her part. The subsequent passage is indicative of this maintenance:

Time was when those brows were not so silkily seductive. It was Madame Vera Verity, directress of the Woman Beautiful page of the Princess Novelette, who had first advised her to try eyebrowleine which gave that haunting expression to the eyes, so becoming in leaders of fashion, and she had never regretted it” (108-113). Gerty took this advice and valued the help she was given in the area of her physical appearance. It is also mentioned that on this very morning, Gerty had cut her hair and nails on account of the new moon (U, 13.117-18).

In doing so, her hair looks even more beautiful than it usually does. The narrator writes, “But Gerty’s crowning glory was her wealth of wonderful hair. It was dark brown with a natural wave in it. She had cut it that very morning on account of the new moon and it nestled about her pretty head in a profusion of luxuriant clusters and pared her nails too, Thursday for wealth” (U, 13.116-19). The illusion to “crowning” plays again with the queenly nature that Gerty exudes, but this passage also displays Gerty’s self-conscious awareness of the necessity of her upkeep. The sentimental nationalism that appears yet again in relation to Gerty is humbling but also ironic. Gerty’s extreme self-consciousness of her “queenly” nature resonates with the narrator’s irony in relation to this.
characteristic nationalism. The narrator vacillates between sentimentalizing the past through a tone similar to Gerty’s own, as well as ironically resisting the idealizing of the past through mention of Gerty’s anxiety about her status as “queen.”

Not only is Gerty aware that she needs to work at making her beauty striking, but she also attempts to direct it at and for a specific boy she desires—Reggy Wylie. The narrator writes, “Gerty was dressed simply but with the instinctive taste of a votary of Dame Fashion for she felt that there was just a might that he might be out” (U, 13.148-49). The description of her clothing is important because of the attention to detail that is given, as well as the particular feminine voice that seems to pick up while describing Gerty:

> A neat blouse of electric blue selftinted by dolly dyes (because it was expected in the Lady’s Pictorial that electric blue would be worn) with a smart vee opening down to the division and kerchief pocket (in which she always kept a piece of cottonwool scented with her favourite perfume because the handkerchief spoiled the sit) and a navy threequarter skirt cut to the stride showed off her slim graceful figure to perfection. She wore a coquettish little love of a hat of wideleaved nigger\(^\text{12}\) straw contrast trimmer with an underim of eggblue chenille and at the side a butterfly bow of silk to tone (U, 13.150-58).

This description emphasizes Gerty’s attention to the accepted norm of beauty by referencing the fashion pages and advertisements found in the “Lady’s Pictorial”: because blue is worn in there, Gerty expects herself to replicate that image. Gerty also scents a piece of cottonwool with perfume as a way to display her femininity through a different sensory outlet. After describing her clothing attire, the narrator says that Gerty was trying all week to find the piece of cloth that was described on this hat, and once she did, she was able to fix it on herself. This shows the importance Gerty places on one

\(^{12}\) Unconscious racism suggests the extent to which Gerty participates in the more general commodification of and hierarchizing of bodies. This is, essentially, the way Gerty would speak.
facet of her outfit—this kind of obsessive nature in finding the perfect piece of fabric to fit her preconceived model of what equates to femininity. The fabric, however, is described as being “slightly shopsoiled but you would never notice” (U, 13.160) and that is significant. Since the fabric was slightly soiled, she was able to get a bargain. This kind of manipulation and hiding of flaws in the fabric resonates deeper with Gerty’s attempt at hiding her own flaw—her “one shortcoming.” In addition to the description of her clothing, the pride Gerty takes in her shoe size is integral in gaining an understanding of Gerty’s inner workings: “Her shoes were the newest thing in footwear (Edy Boardman prides herself that she was very petite but she never had a foot like Gerty MacDowell, a five, and never would ash, oak or elm) with patent toecaps and just one smart buckle over her higharched instep” (U, 13.164-67). Gerty hungers to be the most feminine through maintenance of the unparalleled delicacy and smallness of her feet and yet her evasive “higharched instep” is alluded to once again.

Although Gerty’s feet are important in sculpting the ideal feminine look, she takes the most effort in preserving her undergarments:

As for undies they were Gerty’s chief care…She had four dinky sets with awfully pretty stitchery, three garments and nighties extra, and each set allotted with different coloured ribbons, rosepink, pale blue, mauve and peagreen, and she aired them herself and blued them when they came home from the wash and ironed them and she a brickbat to keep the iron on because she wouldn’t trust those washerwomen as far as she’s see them scorching the things (U, 13.171-79).

Gerty does not trust the washerwoman to wash her “undies” because that would allow a loss of control over her materials that are integral in shaping her feminine look. Gerty feels that she understands what it takes to become the most beautiful and feminine, and she does not want any person tampering with, essentially, her feminine equipment. Her “undies” are her most intimate garments and, although Gerty is reluctant to admit it, they
are sexualized by their very nature. In addition to wearing specific clothing for her desired Reggy Wylie, she is also wearing certain “undies” in hopes that he will be out. He writes, “She was wearing the blue for luck…because the green she wore that day week brought grief because his father brought him in to study” (U, 13.179-81). Although Gerty acknowledges the care with which she decides what underwear to wear, she refuses to acknowledge the explicitly sexual in this part of the chapter. She is consciously fetishizing these sexualized garments but she is always evasive about her sexuality—alluding to it but never quite naming any specifically sexual feeling or act.

Gerty’s preoccupation with looking a certain way at all times even bleeds into her attempts to release herself emotionally. There is strain on Gerty’s beautiful face, and yet, when given the opportunity to break free from that strain through the shedding of tears, Gerty is still so tightly constrained by her image of the appropriate and the feminine: “A gnawing sorrow is there all the time…she would give worlds to be in the privacy of her own familiar chamber where, giving way to tears, she could have a good cry and relieve her pentup feelings through not too much she knew how to cry nicely before the mirror. You are lovely, Gerty, it said” (U, 13.189-93). The mirror speaks to Gerty because she needs it to. Gerty’s self-affirmation comes purely from the fact that the image she creates is a “pinnacle” of femininity and because, in doing so, she can believe that she surpasses all other women.

The discourse of femininity, of being “fixed up,” suggests that the unmodified is unnatural. Within this discourse, the natural is, in fact, paradoxically unnatural. Gerty places herself within a visual economy in which appearance is the primary index of value for women. She recognizes that these feminizing practices she partakes in through the
upkeep of her impeccable appearance normalize the female body culturally, while any kind of aberration from this ideal of femininity—specifically a disability—makes it abnormal. Feminization, which Gerty has mastered, prompts the gaze as “as fair as a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see” (U, 13.80-1) indicates, whereas disability prompts the ostracizing and fearful stare. Gerty knows that feminization increases a woman’s cultural capital, and disability decreases it. This is evident in the statement about her disability, “she always tried to conceal it” (U, 13.651). She feels deep down that her deformity has jeopardized her birthright to love. As she struggles to emulate the ideal “womanly woman”—essentially one of those “lovely seaside girls” that are all reassuringly the same, she has to assure herself that “love laughs at locksmiths” (U, 13.364) because she feels that nothing is impossible in true romance. In Gerty MacDowell’s mind, a magical dream husband will surely unbind her lameness. As a matter of survival, Gerty must market herself as “more feminine” than the other girls. Gerty packages her body in a manner that advertises the culturally accepted norm of femininity. By doing herself up, she sees in the mirror not her reflection but a manufactured likeness of a culturally defined standard of what is femininity. Gerty divorces herself from what her actual reflection in order to masquerade as an image that excites male desire.

II. “Those girls, those girls, those lovely seaside girls”: Gerty’s Female Competitors

For Gerty, her goal is to perform the masquerade of femininity more convincingly than other women.13 Gerty markets herself as an object shaped in accordance with what is feminine. She objectifies herself not only because she recognizes the culture of

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femininity in which she lives, but she recognizes the competition that “those lovely seaside girls”—specifically Cissy Caffrey and Edy Boardman—present for her. Gerty knows that she is different and because of this she shields herself with a mask of impeccable and unparalleled femininity. Even given this feminine “hauteur,” however, she still remains on the outside. Her “hauteur” suggests her self-protective mentality in believing that she is better than those girls as a result of not being able to be one of them. Cissy and Edy are able to do things that Gerty is not able to do. Gerty is not a “lovely seaside girl” and her otherness is indicated at specific moments within their interactions. Both girls attempt to humiliate her as a way to expose the seemingly perfect example of femininity—Gerty MacDowell—as fueled by the competition dictated by the sexual marketplace.

One example of their attempt at humiliation is their malicious effort to get Gerty to kick the ball after having missed it the first time:

Our two champions claimed their plaything with lusty cries and to avoid trouble Cissy Caffrey called to the gentleman to throw it to her please. The gentleman aimed the ball once or twice and then threw it up the strand towards Cissy Caffrey but it rolled down the slope and stopped right under Gerty’s skirt near the little pool by the rock. The twins clamoured again for it and Cissy told her to kick it away and let them fight for it so Gerty drew back her foot but she wished their stupid ball hadn’t come rolling down to her and she gave a kick but she missed and Edy and Cissy laughed.

-If you fail try again, Edy Boardman said.
Gerty smiled assent and bit her lip. A delicate pink crept into her pretty cheek but she was determined to let them see so she just lifted her skirt a little but just enough and took good aim and gave the ball a jolly good kick and it went ever so far and the two twins after it down towards the shingle. Pure jealousy of course it was nothing else to draw attention on account of the gentleman opposite looking (U, 13.350-365).

Although the girls are obviously aware of Gerty’s disability, they still both laugh at her failure to kick the ball on her first attempt. Edy’s facetious comment is powerful because
there is a mocking undertone to her suggestion. For Gerty, her disability is a failure to adhere to the strict cultural feminine parameters and, no matter how many times she tries, once that disability is recognized, she is doomed to fail in her own eyes. Edy plays around with this idea about having a second chance because, in a way, Edy also recognizes that the sexual marketplace is a place where failure is not an option if a woman wants to secure herself in terms of financial security, as well as romantic love. In light of Cissy and Edy’s attempt to humiliate Gerty, Gerty is still able to recognize that it is fueled by their jealousy of the attention a male observer seems to pay her saying “Pure jealousy of course it was nothing else to draw attention on account of the gentleman opposite looking” (U, 13.364-5).

Cissy and Edy also attempt to expose Gerty as a false feminine ideal when Edy asks Gerty about having recently broken up with a supposed boyfriend:

and Edy and Cissy were talking about the time all the time and asking her but Gerty could pay them back in their own coin and she just answered with scathing politeness when Edy asked her was she heartbroken about her best boy throwing her over. Gerty winced sharply. A brief cold blaze shone from her eyes that spoke volumes of scorn immeasurable (U, 13.575-579).

The same hurtful and mocking undertone that is evident in Edy’s previous comment resonates with her probing questions in this instance as well. Edy tries to initiate some sort of outrage in Gerty as a way to invalidate her femininity, but Gerty resists. Asking a friend about whether or not she is heartbroken is an act which exposes her vulnerability. But with Gerty, vulnerability is also linked to her disability because it places her in jeopardy of losing the gaze of the outsiders, which is something Gerty would never want.

Although Gerty takes abuse from the two other girls, she does have her own negative tirades about the two girls as her way of validating the femininity that they are
trying to ruin, as well as exposing their lack of femininity. Gerty forces herself to be
“done up” and act more femininely than Edy and Cissy as a way to prove to the outside
world that she is just as womanly and as “lovely” as they are. Due to her “shortcoming,”
she feels pressure to compensate. This pressure to compensate for her femininity is
manifested in her candid and derogatory remarks about Cissy and Edy. One instance is
Gerty’s comments on the lack of feminine tact with which Cissy speaks as well as
indicating that she would never act in such a way:

-I’d like to give him something, she said, so I would, where I won’t say.
-On the beeoteetom, laughed Cissy merrily.
Gerty MacDowell bent down her head and crimsoned at the idea of Cissy saying
an unladylike thing like that out loud she’d be ashamed of her life to say, flushing
a deep rosy red, and Edy Boardman said she was sure the gentleman opposite
heard what she said. But not a pin cared Ciss (U, 13.263-265).

For Cissy, saying an unladylike thing does not place anything she values at stake,
whereas for Gerty it would be breaking free from the mask of femininity which she holds
tightly as her own. Gerty also speaks negatively about the girls specifically in reference
to Edy:

Edy Boardman was noticing it too because she was squinting at Gerty, half
smiling, with her specs like an old maid, pretending to nurse the baby. Irritable
little gnat she was and always would be and that was why no-one could get on
with her poking her nose into what was no concern of hers (U, 13.521-24).

She later refers to her again as an irritating gnat-like entity, “the little kinnatt” (U,
13.600). Gerty passes what would be the most hurtful remark to her upon Edy—that no-
one could love her. In responding to Edy’s questions about her recent “break-up,” “It
hurt—O yes, it cut deep because Edy had her own quiet way of saying things like that she
knew would wound like the confounded little cat she was” (U, 13.579-581). Edy strikes
a nerve in Gerty because of her unfeminine way of poking her nose into other’s business.
She has a quiet way of trying to make other competitors—specifically Gerty—look bad specifically through her use of language. For Edy Boardman, her most dangerous weapon to Gerty is the power of her words and Gerty surely recognizes that.

Cissy Caffrey, however, poses a different—although still dangerous—threat to Gerty. Instead of the powerful threat Edy poses using language as her weapon, Cissy threatens Gerty with her physique and ability to perform actions that Gerty can not. Gerty is fixated on Cissy’s legs and, after describing Cissy’s long and able legs, Gerty hopes that she trips:

She ran with long gandery strides it was a wonder she didn’t rip up her skirt at the side that was too tight on her because there was a lot of the tomboy about Cissy Caffrey and she was a forward piece whenever she thought she had a good opportunity to show off and just because she was a good runner she ran like that so that he could see all the end of her petticoat running and her skinny shanks up as far as possible. It would have served her just right if she had tripped up over something accidentally on purpose with her high crooked French heels on her to make her look tall and got a fine tumble. Tableau. That would have been a very charming exposé for a gentleman like that to witness (U, 13.474-488).

Gerty fixates on Cissy’s legs with comments like “She ran with long gandery strides” and “just because she was a good runner she ran like that” in a tone that is laced with envy.

Gerty is obviously unable to be a good runner because of her lameness. Although she is not as concerned with her feminine appearance as Gerty is, Cissy attempts to use her physicality to demand the attention of the male onlooker. Gerty recognizes Cissy’s motives by saying, “she was a forward piece whenever she thought she had a good opportunity to show off” as well as “so that he could see all the end of her petticoat running and her skinny shanks up as far as possible.” Although Gerty is making comments about Cissy, she is implicated in her comments “charming exposé for a gentleman like that to witness” as well as “so that he could see all the end of her petticoat
running and her skinny shanks up as far as possible.” This is exactly what she will do later with Bloom. She leans back and allows Bloom access to a full view of her “skinny shanks.” Thus, her envy is an attempt to imitate in addition to surpass Cissy. She later comments again about Cissy’s awareness about looking good in front of the male observer, “Cissy took off the twins’ caps and tidied their hair to make herself attractive of course” (U, 13.571). Not only does Gerty wish that Cissy trips as she is running, Gerty speaks harshly about Cissy as a disgraceful representation of woman:

Cissy came up along the strand with the two twins and their ball with her hat anyhow on her to one side after her run and she did look a streetl ruging the two kids along with the flimsy blouse she bought only a fortnight before like a rag on her back and a bit of her petticoat hanging like a caricature (U, 13.505-9).

Gerty makes fun of Cissy’s improper ways of dress in a way that does not even allow her to be constructed as an actual image of a woman—rather she is a laughable cartoon image. Unlike Gerty’s “unmatched” beautiful head of hair, she speaks negatively about Cissy’s hair as well, “tossing her hair behind her which had a good enough colour if there had been more of it but with all the thingamerry she was always rubbing into it she couldn’t get it to grow long because it wasn’t natural so she could just go and throw her hat at it” (U, 13.475-78). In order to make herself feel better, Gerty has to expose Cissy’s lack of femininity. She does this as a way to devalue Cissy’s worth on the sexual market and, in doing so helps boost her own feelings about her personal value.

Another example of Gerty’s vulnerability in regards to Cissy is her attentiveness to the young children. Cissy’s response to Edy Boardman’s baby brother is integral in differentiating between the normal and the abnormal. The abnormal is represented by Gerty because she is disabled. For a disabled woman, one of the largest challenges was her ability to be an acceptable mother: “Motherhood, the institution and experience that
perhaps has dominated all cultural conceptions of women—often has been proscribed for a woman with a disability."14 In addition to the culture seeming to prevent women with disabilities to take on the role of motherhood, medical aspects of reproduction also contributed as well because of the historicized belief that deformity would be passed on. This anxiety is foreshadowed with this interlude with the baby. Gerty does not like the babies—she wants them to go home.

The exasperating little brats of twins began to quarrel again and Jacky threw the ball out towards the sea and they both ran after it. Little monkeys common as ditchwater. Someone ought to take them and give them a good hiding for themselves to keep them in their places, the both of them. And Cissy and Edy shouted after them to come back because they were afraid the tide might come in on them and be drowned (U, 13.466-470).

The contrast between the irritation the children cause for Gerty as compared with Cissy and Edy’s concern for the safety of the children is striking in this moment. Gerty would like the children to be out of her way, “Gerty wished to goodness they would take their squalling baby home out of that and not get on her nerves, no hour to be out, and the little brats of twins” because she knows what they represent. As a feminine ideal, she is supposed to be a maternal caregiver. Her irritation with the children is fueled by her anxiety about being a mother as a disabled woman.15 She is envious of Cissy’s ability to play with the baby since she takes great detail in describing Cissy’s actions:

Cissy Caffrey played with baby Boardman till he crowded with glee, clapping baby hands in the air. Peep she cried behind the hood of the pushcar and Edy asked where has Cissy gone and then Cissy popped up her head and cried ah! And, my word, didn’t the little chap enjoy that! And then she told him to say papa…Cissy wiped his little mouth with the dribbling bib and wanted him to sit

15 Asch and Fine, 281. “Each time I announced I was pregnant, everyone in the family looked shocked, dropped their forks at the dinnertable—not exactly a celebration” (35-year-old, white married woman, mother of two, who contracted polio at age 5)"
up properly and say pa pa pa but when she undid the strap she cried out, holy saint Denis, that he was possing wet and to double the half blanket the other way under him...And two great lovely big tears coursing down his cheeks. It was all no use soothering him with no, nono, baby, no and telling him about the geegee and where as the puffpuff but Ciss, always readywitted, gave him in his mouth the teat of the suckingbottle and young heathen was quickly appeased (U, 13.382-403).

In observing Cissy, Gerty comments “but Ciss, always readywitted, gave him in his mouth the teat of the suckingbottle” that quickly satiated the young baby and that speaks to a maternal instinct—a “readywit” that Gerty is anxious about lacking. Gerty’s anxiety about her lack of maternal instinct suggests what is at stake here—that she is not desirable as a potential marital partner because the accidental is seen as genetic. Her disability may in fact disqualify her from the sexual marketplace.

Gerty’s meticulous attention to her upkeep is not a futile effort—rather, it is her strategy to defeat other women in terms of her appearance. Although her attention to detail may be viewed as obsessive, she is trying to overcome her “defect” that, in her mind and also to others, could possibly disqualify her from the sexual marketplace and expose the fact that she veers away from the very rigid standard of femininity. The first verse of “Those Lovely Seaside Girls” sets up the meaning of what a lovely seaside girl actually is:

Down at Margate looking very charming you are sure to meet
Those girls, dear girls, those lovely seaside girls,
With sticks they steer and promenade the pier to give the boys a treat,
In pique silks and lace, they tip you quite a playful wink.
It always is the case you seldom stop to think
You fall in love of course upon the spot,
But not with one girl, always with the lot.16

The last two lines, “You fall in love of course upon the spot, But not with one girl, always with the lot” are important because they suggest that “lovely seaside girls” are one

in the same—they are all one entity. As Gerty is different than the other two girls, she cannot fit into the “lovely seaside girl” category. She is not part of “the lot.” Gerty, as well as Edy and Cissy, knows that she is an outsider. Ultimately, Gerty says about herself in regards to the other girls, “they both knew that she was something aloof, apart, in another sphere, that she was not of them and never would be” (U, 13.602-3). Her acknowledgement of her existence as ‘Other’ creates the necessity to compensate in regards to these other competing forces in this sexual marketplace.

III. “O! and everyone cried O! O!”: Mutual Masturbation and Erotic Victories

The most important part of the masturbatory interaction for Gerty is the sense of being desired. She wants someone to want her and, finally, she is victorious. In light of her competing sexual predators vying for Bloom’s attention, from the first few moments she sees Bloom, she is confident that he has eyes only for her. Although she feels threatened by Cissy and Edy in their attempts to secure the male observer’s gaze, she knows that he is always staring at only her:

Cissy Caffrey caught the two twins and she was itching to give them a ringing good clip on the ear but she didn’t because she thought he might be watching but she never made a bigger mistake in all her life because Gerty could see without looking that he never took his eyes off her (U, 13.492-96).

She never vacillates in her belief that Bloom’s attention is solely for her:

She could almost see the swift answering flash of admiration in his eyes that set her tingling in every nerve. She put on her hat so that she could see from underneath the brim and swung her buckled shoe faster for her breath caught as she caught the expression in his eyes. He was eying her as a snake eyes its prey. Her woman’s instinct told her that she had raised the devil in him and at the thought a burning scarlet from throat to brow till the lovely colour of her face became a glorious rose (U, 13.513-520).

Although the “lovely seaside girls” pressure her, Gerty is most confident that we see Bloom’s glances as validating her in that they are intended solely for her:
His dark eyes fixed themselves on her again, drinking in her every contour, literally worshipping her shrine. If ever there was undisguised admiration in a man’s passionate gaze it was there plain to be seen on that man’s face. It if for you, Gertrude MacDowell, and you know it (U, 13.563-67).

Gerty’s confidence springs from her trust in her masquerade as an objectified female specimen. She knows that she has turned herself into the quintessential fetish-object and, as a result, all eyes are on her.

Gerty, however, is far from being passively female in this scene because, although she does not masturbate in the physical sense, she is taken over by physical sensations:

The eyes that were fastened upon her set her pulses tingling. She looked at him a moment, meeting his glance, and a light broke in upon her. Whitehot passion was in that face, passion silent as the grave, and it had made her his (U, 13.689-692).

She continues to reveal more about her implicit awareness of what he begins to do, as well as what happens to her once his masturbation begins:

His hands and face were working and a tremour went over her. She leaned back far to look up where the fireworks were and she caught her knee in her hands so as not to fall back looking up and there was no-one to see only him and her when she revealed all her graceful beautifully shaped legs like that, supply soft and delicately rounded, and she seemed to hear the panting of her heart, his hoarse breathing, because she knew too about the passion of men like that, hotblooded (U, 13.695-701).

Although Laura Mulvey argues that women in classic Hollywood cinema are vulnerable to being objectified by a male’s controlling gaze,¹⁷ that is not happening here. There is difference in this gaze. Although Gerty is actively playing a docile feminine ideal, she is playing a part in order to procure a desired effect in her favor. Gerty’s apparent conformity to a gendered role of passively surveyed female is strategic. She uses the identity of the passive specimen as a way to disguise her own reciprocal voyeurism. She

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monitors Bloom through a constant battery of glances concealed behind the mask of her perfected femininity. For example, she is able to cast a "beautiful" glance out to the sea while simultaneously confirming he is looking at her. She refuses to stare and gawk at Bloom in an unfeminine way and would rather create a picturesque image of herself gazing out to the ocean. She, however, is still able to finagle a glance his way to confirm that his eyes are on only her. Her look at Bloom exposes the true desire that she tries to conceal behind her mask: “I’m all clean come dirty me” (U, 13.797). Although this is what Bloom thinks, voiced through a language that she would never use, it is still suggestive about the ambivalence she approaches the subject of her own sexuality. Through her perfect display of femininity, she has created herself as an ideal fetish object. By promoting her womanliness, she has allowed Bloom further insight into what lays beneath that. “Come dirty me” is laced with sexual undertones because although Gerty prides herself on being the ideal woman, her attention to the fetishizing of "clean" underwear automatically raises its opposite, "dirty". Gerty thinks about the possibility of "dirtied" underwear in thinking about her menstrual cycle, "she knew by the feel of her scalp and that irritation against her stays that that thing must be coming on" (U, 13.561-63). Like sexuality, her menstrual cycle is something that she can not speak about and refers to as a "thing." Gerty never loses control in this interaction because she eliminates all intimate human components that she does not feel comfortable addressing directly. Her artful deployment of glances only strengthens her control of her performance. Gerty is a fetish object ironically in control; she is promoting a sexuality she does and does not understand.
The actual mutual masturbation is imbued with erotic symbolism and religious overtones and undertones:

… she leaned back ever so far to see the fireworks and something queer was flying through the air, a soft thing, to and fro, dark. And she saw a long Roman candle going up over the trees, up, up, and, in the tense hush, they were all breathless with excitement as it went higher and higher and she had to lean back more and more to look up after it, high, high, almost out of sight, and her face was suffused with a divine, an entrancing blush from straining back and he could see her other things too, nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin, better than those other pettiwidth, the green, four and eleven, on account of being white and she let him and she saw that he saw and then it went so high it went out of sight a moment and she was trembling in every limb from being bent so far back that he had a full view high above her knew where no-on ever not even on the swing or wading and she wasn’t ashamed and he wasn’t either to look in that immodest way like that because she couldn’t resist the sight of the wondrous revealment half offered like those skirtdancers behaving so immodest before gentlemen looking and he kept on looking, looking. She would fain have cried to him chokingly, held out her snowy slender arms to him to come, to feel his lips laid on her white brow, the cry of a young girl’s love, a little strangled cry, wrung from her, that cry that has rung through the ages. And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind blank and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushes out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! They were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lovely, O, soft, sweet, soft! (U, 13.717-40)

The masturbation scene is permeated with Roman candle imagery that resonates with the religious conviction Gerty harps on, as well as creating an interesting symbolic reference that conflates the erotic and religious for the masturbation. Bloom’s actual climax is dictated by the use of the Roman candle imagery in metasexualized narrative, “And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind blank and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushes out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! They were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lovely, O, soft, sweet, soft!” Although Bloom's climax is a physical culmination, Gerty is able to get physical pleasure out of the interaction as well, “a little strangled cry, wrung from her, that cry that has rung through the ages.” Physical
pleasure, however, is not what Gerty is looking to get out of this exchange. She does not wish to have the same physical climax that Bloom has because, for her, phallic sexuality—just knowing that his climax is taking place because of her—is the most pleasurable thing of all. In other words, her knowledge that confirms her as desirable is what she desires stronger than anything else.

Gerty is very much aware of Bloom’s masturbation that is taking place. Her awareness is validated by, “she let him and she saw that he saw” in addition to, “she wasn’t ashamed and he wasn’t either to look in that immodest way because she couldn’t resist the sight of the wondrous revealment half offered like those skirtdancers.” In this moment, the narrator's language is not romanticized—rather, the narration allows for an acceptance of the profane body: “she wasn’t ashamed.” Gerty’s reference to the “skirtdancers” refers to how she was informed about the male passion by Bertha Supple:

because she knew too about the passion of men like that, hotblooded, because Bertha Supple told her once in dead secret and made her swear she’d never about the gentleman lodger that was staying with them out of the Congested Districts Board that had pictures cut out of papers of those skirtdancers and highkickers and she said he used to do something not very nice that you could imagine sometimes in bed (U, 13.700-706).

She is aware of what is happening with Bloom because she recognizes that it is the same as had happened with the gentleman lodger. She enjoys his sexualizing glances and feels good that she is an object of a man’s desire. Gerty is aware that she has sexually excited him although she voices it in a religious image, "Her woman's instinct told her that she had raised the devil in him" (U, 13.517-18). Not only is Gerty aware that she excites him, but she is also aware of his masturbation although she does not want to acknowledge it, "he could see and he was looking all the time he was winding the watch or whatever he was doing to it and then he put it back and put his hands back into his pockets" (U,
They are bound in a mutual masturbation because she is getting her pleasure out of the fact that he is pleasuring himself because of her. This is phallic sexuality, organized around and derived from male pleasure: she is able to cry out in pleasure because she is aware of his masturbation.

She is not able to climax physically because of three main factors. First, she is bound by the idea of absolution, “Besides there was absolution so long as you didn’t do the other thing before being married” (U, 13.708-709); thus her cry is strangled. She is prevented from indulging completely in this eroticism because of her religious beliefs, here separated from the exotic, but her awareness of being desired allows her to emit some sort of exclamation of passion. Secondly, she is not in love with Bloom. She loves the feeling of being desired, but the fetish object she produces of herself does not have the ability to love even in light of her romanticized language: “The very heart of the girlwoman went out to him, her dreamhusband…If he had suffered, more sinned against than sinning, or even, even, if he had been himself a sinner, a wicked man, she cared not” (U, 13.430-34). The love that Gerty speaks of seems to surpass even her deepest religious barriers, but these are just sentimentalized words. Through constructing herself as a purely sexualized object of desire, she is incapable of engaging in the most human emotion—love. Her romanticized language is derived simultaneously from the lack of experience or hope she has for marriage given her disability. Lastly, as previously established, Gerty treats herself as an object as does Bloom, and therefore is incapable of climaxing on a level that demands attention to human erogenous zones. She is advertising herself as an object and, in doing so, turns herself into an object and, unfortunately for Gerty, objects—as beautiful as they may be—can not orgasm.
Bloom and Gerty have a mutual masturbatory exchange where they share moments of intimacy that allow temporary escape from individual isolation:

Was it goodbye? No. She had to go but they would meet again, there, and she would dream of that till then, tomorrow, of her dream of yester eve. She drew herself up to her full height. Their souls met in a last lingering glance and they eyes that reached her heart, full of a strange shining, hung enraptured on her sweet flowerlike face (U, 13.760-64).

Bloom, even after recognizing her disability, delights in the excitement and temporary escape their exchange was able to give to him:

For this relief much thanks…It was all things combined. Excitement. When she leaned back, felt an ache at the butt of my tongue. Your head it simply swirls. He’s right. Might have made a worse fool of myself however. Instead of talking about nothing. Then I will tell you all. Still it was a kind of language between us (U, 13.939-944).

Gerty proves she can arouse, titillate and satisfy masculine desire and, because of that, this is an erotic victory for Gerty.

Although Gerty is victorious, Bloom is still the person who experiences orgasm. Bloom’s orgasm, however, is directly predicated on his belief in her masquerade of femininity:

Mr Bloom with careful hand recomposed his wet shirt. O Lord, that little limping devil. Begins to feel cold and clammy. Aftereffect no pleasant. Still you have to get rid of it someway. They don’t care. Complimented perhaps. Go home to nicey break and milky and say night prayers with the kiddies. Well, aren’t they? See her as she is spoil all. Must have the stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music (U, 13.850-55).

Bloom’s climax rests on Gerty’s ability to appear as something that she is not and Bloom recognizes that. In saying, “Must have the stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music” Bloom indicates that he is aware of the successful masquerade of femininity Gerty has been able to perform.
IV. “Poor girl!”: Disability as Humanizing: De-Idealizing the Body

Although Bloom alludes to Gerty’s performance, indicating that there is something beneath the objectified female specimen he took pleasure in viewing, he does not treat her any differently until he recognizes her disability. Throughout this interaction, Gerty successfully promotes herself as a feminine object and is perceived as such by Bloom. It is not until Bloom recognizes her disability that she becomes textually humanized:

She walked with a certain quiet dignity characteristic of her but with care and very slowly because—because Gerty MacDowell was…

Tight boots? No. She’s lame! O!

Mr Bloom watched her as she limped away. Poor girl! That’s why she’s left on the shelf and the others did a sprint. Thought something was wrong by the cut of her jib. Jilted beauty. A defect is ten times worse in a woman. But makes them polite. Glad I didn’t know when she was on show. Hot little devil all the same. I wouldn’t mind. Curiosity like a nun or a negress or a girl with glasses (U, 13.770-780).

Initially, Bloom's response strengthens the conflation of disability with sexlessness in his claim "That's why she's left on the shelf," "Jilted beauty" and even the idea that her disability would have usurped her sexuality, “Glad I didn't know when she was on show.” The next line, however, "Hot little devil all the same" seems to place little importance on the disability and validate her sexual prowess regardless of its existence. Building from that, Bloom then re-sexualizes her and differently identifies her as a fetish object—the disability becomes sexually provocative, the site of erotic attention. Her disability seems to take on an erotic flavor for Bloom by referencing "Curiosity like a nun or a negress or a girl with glasses." It is the “glasses” that makes the “girl” sexy. It is the “curiosity” sparked by the supposed abstinence of the “Nun” that makes her sexual. This eroticizes
disability in a way that creates a completely different sexual image of Gerty. In light of all this reassigning and objectifying that takes place after Bloom’s recognition, the most important exclamation is "Poor girl" because, even in light of his range of commentary on her sexuality after the recognition of disability, this first exclamation provides Gerty with a link to the world she has not been privileged to enter thus far. What has prevented her from inhabiting the world naturally has been her unnatural upkeep that, paradoxically, she feels presents her in the most natural feminine form. It is this realization of her “natural” body—the body that she feels is the most hideous, unfeminine and unnatural—that allows Bloom to see her as a natural human being for the first time. That recognition prevents her from being objectified even in light of his objectifying comments. It does not matter that Bloom speaks erotically of her disability because that speaks to Bloom’s own sexual perversion. Bloom’s initial exclamation transforms Gerty into a natural human being, and regardless of what is said after that, this transformation is not negated, but rather speaks to Bloom’s own perverse sexual urges and fantasies. Although much of the discourse in this chapter is suffused with sentimentality, the exclamation “Poor girl” after Bloom’s recognition of Gerty’s lameness identifies her for the first time as a person rather than a sexual thing. It is Gerty’s disability that introduces her into the realm of humanity. Disability is humanizing in the sense that there is a recognition of the flawed human body—a de-idealizing of the body. Lennard Davis writes:

The notion of an ideal implies that...the human body as visualized in art imagination must be composed from the ideal part of loving models. These models individually can never embody the ideal since an ideal, by definition, can never be found in this world...in a culture with an ideal form of the body, all

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18 Aguilera, Raymond J. “Disability and Delight: Staring Back at the Devotee Community.” BENT May 2001. <http://www.bentvoices.org/culturecrash/aguilera_disability_delight.htm>. As a result of this eroticizing of disability, the idea of "Wannabes" and “Devotees” emerge as well—people that are sexually intrigued by the disabled community and look for partners that are disabled specifically paraplegics.
members of the population are below the ideal. By definition, one can never have an ideal body.\textsuperscript{19}

The relevance of Lennard Davis’ comments in regards to Gerty is that given that an ideal body does not exist, a more realistic attempt at creating images of the body is a healthier way of living rather than creating two opposite ends of the spectrum—ideal and grotesque—that are not even realistic. According to Susan Wendell, since everyone tries to be seen as “normal,” those who are “abnormal” according to the society’s standards are constant reminders to those who are measure up to normal that they may slip outside the standards and become like those who are abnormal. In Gerty’s case, however, Bloom perceives her disability and creates that “abnormality” as a link to the inside world of humanity. Rather than placing her as an outsider to “those lovely seaside girls” because of her disability, Bloom allows it to connect her to the human world. Although some may feel a certain way about the disabled, (“I make her “other” because I don’t want to confront my real body, which I fear and cannot accept,”\textsuperscript{20} Bloom does the opposite.

Not only does Bloom introduce her into humanity, he is forced to confront his own ‘disabilities’ because of his recognition of hers. Bloom’s disabilities are deeply seeded insecurities about his marriage, his religion, as well as his physical appearance. After recognizing Gerty’s disability, Bloom becomes insecure about why Gerty wanted to have that sexual voyeuristic exchange with him, “Saw something in me. Wonder what” (U, 13.833). He continues on by saying, “Ought to attend to my appearance my age. Didn’t let her see me in profile. Still, you never know. Pretty girls and ugly men marrying. Beauty and the beast” (U, 13.836-40). He even conjures up the idea that she

\textsuperscript{19} Davis, 10.
\textsuperscript{20} Wendell, 268.
had someone else in mind, “She must have been thinking of someone else all the time” (U, 13.884-85). These two comments speak to Gerty, but they also resonate with the larger problem Bloom has with his wife, Molly. Bloom’s most explicit revelation of his figurative disability is by referencing his stopped watch, “Funny my watch stopped at half past four…Was that just when he, she? O, he did. Into her. She did. Done. Ah!” (U, 13.846-850) Bloom is speaking here about Molly’s probable sexual encounter with Blazes Boylan. The exclamatory “Ah!” speaks to a release of frustration because he is thinking about their sexual intercourse—something that he has not been able to perform since he lost his youngest son, Rudy. Bloom’s connection to his own disabled manhood as a result of recognizing Gerty’s is significant. In allowing the recognition of one woman’s disability to ignite a self-recognition of figurative or realistic disabilities among a so-called “normal” human male, Bloom becomes more human.

IV. “Dirty Married Man!”: Gerty’s Reappearance in “Circe” and “Narrative Prosthesis”: Keeping the Text Alive through Disabilities

(Leering, Gerty MacDowell limps forward. She draws from behind, ogling, and shows coyly her bloodied clout.)

GERTY:
With all my worldly goods I thee and thou. (she murmurs) You did that. I hate you.

BLOOM:
I? When? You’re dreaming. I never saw you…

GERTY:
(to Bloom) When you saw all the secrets of my bottom drawer. (she paws his sleeve, slobbering) Dirty married man! I love you for doing that to me. (She glides away crookedly…) (U, 15.372-386)

Gerty’s reappearance in “Circe” Chapter 15 emphasizes and exaggerates all of the issues which circulate around disability: his guilt, her ambivalence over her own sexuality and her lameness. The body, as we have seen, is an outlet for many underlying
feelings within the text. Manipulations of the body can help identify lingering feelings about specific characters. Disability in literature can act as an opportunity for a metaphoric device which David Mitchell calls “narrative prosthesis.” Literature, similar to disability, functions without absolute standards or proof and is “unruly” compared to hard sciences. Although literature has no absolute boundaries, it gains the advantage of flexibility. Disabled bodies prove to be undisciplined compared to stable bodies because they refuse to conform to the controlling “narratives” of medicine or rehabilitative science. Mitchell writes, “The inherent vulnerability and variability of bodies serve literary narratives as a metonym for that which refuses to conform to disciplinary desire for order and rationality so apparent in empirical disciplines.” Disability, in a textual sense, acts as a metaphor of the body’s “unruly” resistance to the cultural desire to enforce normalcy. The body’s materiality functions as a textual and cultural “other.” It is an object of its own undisciplined language that exceeds the text’s and the culture’s ability to control it. Literary narratives incorporate disabled bodies into their text as reminders of the real physical limits as well as indication of the unpredictability of the body that the “truth-seeking disciplines” try to avoid acknowledging. Disability is unique in that it is the “recalcitrant corporeal matter” that cannot be deconstructed by any kind of text or narrative.

The representation of disability allows for an interrogation of beliefs about the so-called “normal” body while also erupting as the unseemly substance of narrative that cannot be contained. As with Gerty MacDowell, her disability is that part of her that seems to be her own self-worth’s ruination. At the same time, however, Bloom takes her disability as an introduction into humanity. Beyond making a positive statement about

21 Mitchell, 16-17.
disability, Gerty’s disability marks a larger anxiety that lingers within the text as a whole. “Narrative prosthesis” is defined as a narrative use of a disability within the text as a crutch on which to lean on for representational power and social critique. This happens when disabled bodies show up in literary narratives as dynamic entities that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them—just like Gerty MacDowell. All narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a humiliation or to rein in excessiveness.

Mitchell writes,

The normal, routine, average, and familiar (by definition) fail to mobilize the storytelling effort, because they fall short of the litmus test of exceptionality that generates plot. The anonymity of normalcy is no story at all. Deviance serves as the basis and common denominator of all narrative. In this sense, the missing leg preselects the aberrant soldier as the story’s focus, for his physical difference exiles him from the rank and file of the uniform and physically undifferentiated troop. Whereas a sociality might reject, isolate, institutionalize, reprimand, or obliterate this liability of having a single leg, narrative embraces the opportunity that such a lack provides—in fact, narrative wills it into existence—because it is in the impetus that calls a story into being (Michell, 21-21).

James Joyce’s literary work is excessive and humiliating, and he uses Gerty’s disability to justify the imperfections of every character he creates in the text. Rather than disqualifying the characters by learning about their bodily functions or extramarital affairs, we rely on those imperfections as a way to possess the characters on a deeper level. The text as a whole is not perfect—lack of grammar, made up words—but similar to Gerty’s disability, this “deviance” makes the narrative what it is. Gerty’s disability and its mimesis textually impels the narrative to continue and is the foundation on which the rest of the narrative is build upon. Gerty’s disability and the interconnectedness between feminist disability theory is a “crutch” that the entire narrative relies on to move the text forward. As Mitchell writes, “The narration of the disabled body allows a textual body to

22 Mitchell, 17.
mean through its long-standing historical representation as an overdetermined symbolic surface; the disabled body also offers narrative the illusion of grounding abstract knowledge in a bodily materiality.”23 Gerty’s disability allows feminist theory to speak through her disability and to support the entire narrative. Mitchell says, “Narrative prosthesis or the dependency on disability proves essential to, even the essence of, the story of difference.”24 *Ulysses* is a story of difference, and through the construction of Gerty’s disability as well as Bloom’s recognition of it, her disability is able to create connections among the characters by forcing them to realize their own disabilities—whatever they may be.

**V. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine Gerty MacDowell and how her interaction with Bloom enables a positive feminist disabiliy theory to emerge from the text. Gerty MacDowell, as previously stipulated, objectifies herself through masquerading at the quintessential feminine product. Through her masquerade, she is able to safely hide her secret “defect” which is the disability that she fears will jeopardize her chances in the sexual marketplace. Although Gerty’s excessive use of sentimentalized language as well as the constant religious imagery may lead some to think that it is an attempt to disguise her hunger for sex—that is not the case. Gerty MacDowell does not desire sex in these moments; she desires the act of being desired. In the Lacanian philosophy, “man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of

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23 Mitchell, 28-29.
24 Mitchell, 29.
desire is to be recognized by the other.”25 A very central tenant of Lacan’s thinking on
desire is that the object is only coincident with the desire for desire. Gerty desires to be
desired by a man since she is afraid that can not happen because she is disqualified from
being a “lovely seaside girl.”

What do we make of the young and regal Gerty MacDowell? She is a self-made
fetish object who takes a voyeuristic ride delighting not in seeing a stranger pleasure
himself, rather takes pleasure in knowing that his pleasure was caused by her feminine
exhibitionism. Gerty may not be a “lovely seaside girl,” but her desire to be desired
allows something crucial to happen. Bloom’s recognition of her disability destroys her
commoditized image, and recreates her as human. The significance of this moment is
that Bloom does not relegate a woman to the realm of ‘Other’ because of her disability—
rather, it is the disability that creates a common denominator and allows Gerty’s
induction into the human race as a disabled woman. Continuing to view Gerty as a
sexual being even after her disability is recognized allows a subversion of the stereotyped
asexuality that oppresses disabled women. Through this de-idealizing of the body,
disability culture has a chance to make some strides towards being more accepted within
the culture. Not only does Gerty MacDowell’s coy ‘Peeping Tom’ strategy ironically
gain strides for disabled women, but it also proves to make important contributions to
disability culture. Gerty’s disability and the conflation between feminist and disability
theory is an integral “crutch” the entire narrative relies on to move the text forward. This
recognition helps ideas regarding disabilities in a way that promotes a more realistic idea
about the body and makes the unrealistic and damaging “ideal body” untenable.

Bibliography


