

"Resisting the S(crip)t: Disability Studies Perspectives in the Undergraduate Classroom"

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ABSTRACT: Taking as my key texts two of the most widely read and taught canonical texts in the archive of disability representation, Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People" (1955), I argue that rereading with an eye to the handling of disability invigorates otherwise stale interpretations which take for granted the desirability of physical "normality" and/or that, in literary studies, impairment must be approached primarily as symbolic of internal lack. As an alternative, I offer Rosemarie Garland Thomson's understanding of disability as a "category of analysis," comparable to the categories of race, class, or gender. I conclude my article with a discussion of how and why I also include Cameron Crowe's 2001 film *Vanilla Sky* in classes focused on disability representations, arguing that, like my key texts, the film foregrounds and problematizes the assumptions and scripts which often accrue to disability representation. This article is meant to be useful both to teachers of literature who wish to incorporate disability studies perspectives in their classrooms, but who might not be feel adequately prepared to do so and who want to resist what Nirmala Everelles has termed a "add-and-stir" approach to disability (93), as well as those interested in invigorating some otherwise stale readings of these canonical texts. To that end, my analyses of *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People" are meant to indicate that a disability studies approach is flexible, applicable to diverse texts, and potentially empowering to all readers.

In this article, I use two of the most widely read and taught canonical texts in the archive of disability representation, Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People" (1955), to demonstrate the analytical possibilities of using a disability studies perspective in the undergraduate classroom. Rereading these particular texts with an eye to their handlings of disability is crucial because the critical responses to both *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People"—as teachers and even casual critics are surely aware—have largely focused on physical impairment as reflecting larger social ills and/or characters' internal failings, thus reifying understandings of disabled individuals' experiences as only literary or significant when they are deployed in order to explore non-physical conditions or a non-disabled character's experiences.¹ In addition, this response is

¹ For example, in "The Sister Figure in the Plays of Tennessee Williams," John Strother Clayton writes that Laura's "physical flaw" functions to "to represent and to account for the flawed nature of her character. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual flaw" (113); in "The Southern Gentlewoman," Signi Falk writes that Laura "is as fragile as the little glass ornaments and phonograph records that are her escape" (82). Although these critics pursue other elements at work in "The Glass Menagerie," both readings accept the metaphors that Williams himself offers without further probing the implications of those metaphors. For an overview of the early criticism of *The Glass Menagerie*, see R. B. Parker's "Introduction" to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Glass Menagerie*.

fairly typical; disability in literature is often approached as metaphor. As an alternative, I offer a way to read and teach these texts using Rosemarie Garland Thomson's instructive description of disability as a "category of analysis" (257), comparable to the categories of race, class, or gender. Further, my readings emphasize how these specific stories resist the metaphors and scripts that generally accrue to disability representation.

My analyses are meant to indicate that a disability studies approach is flexible, applicable to diverse texts, and potentially empowering to all readers.² Inherent in my argument is the assumption that rich and complex literature invites rich and complex readings, that many canonical texts could and should support counter-readings using a disability studies perspective. While the texts discussed here are particularly well-suited to be taught together, they are certainly not the only narratives one could incorporate in a course that uses the investigation of representations of disability as either a unit or overarching organizational principle. As numerous disability studies scholars have noted, literature is rife with depictions of

Regarding "Good Country People," critics have traditionally accepted Hulga's humiliation as appropriate within the context of a Christian universe. Sister Kathleen Feeley provides a standard interpretative approach:

Some of the protagonists in [O'Connor's] stories look perfectly normal; others have a physical defect which is symbolic of a spiritual one. In the course of the action, all are given an opportunity to recognize their self-deception. In the author's vision, this recognition is the first step toward truth, which is, in turn, the necessary condition of Redemption. (22-23)

Caroline Gordon, who provides the Foreword to Feeley's study, contends that if O'Connor's characters are considered "freaks" it is "because they have been deprived of the blood of Christ" (x). According to these interpretative approaches, when Pointer teaches Hulga that she does not, in fact, believe in "nothing," he offers her an opportunity for self-scrutinization which may ultimately lead to redemption. In addition, several critics posit O'Connor's characters are reflections of the depravity of modern society. See also Frederick Asals in *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*.

More recent critics, however, have critiqued and built upon the theologically-inflected interpretations. Jon Lance Bacon, for example, concedes that earlier readings have "deepened our understanding of O'Connor," but that they have "also excluded her from most analyses of American fiction that turn on social and political issues. Even as they have praised her imaginative power, her admirers have marginalized O'Connor" (Bacon 5). Louise Westling also critiques the catch-all "pride goeth before the fall" approaches to O'Connor's work, arguing that "no sensitive reader can find either aesthetic or moral satisfaction in that kind of slick, superficial interpretation" (516). In its place, Westling asserts that O'Connor's depictions of females' experiences suggest a preoccupation with the condition of women and claims that their depictions "express a passionate but inadvertent protest against the lot of womankind" (511). Others have seen O'Connor's characters as a more general indictment of modern society and values. In "The Necessity of Disability in 'Good Country People' and 'The Lime Shall Enter First,'" Laura L. Behling does focus on O'Connor's deployment of disability, but is primarily interested in what disabled characters reveal about the experiences of the non-disabled. She writes, "the disabled are, in fact, necessary in order to expose imperfection and inhumanity" (88) and that ultimately, "the disabled body is the modern mirror in which humanity is recognized as hurtling toward ruin and impersonality amid utter confusion" (89).

² A true disability studies pedagogy also embraces universal design, insisting on accessibility in all aspects of the educational situation, including the classroom's built environment as well as curriculum.

disability; there is much work to be done as we continue to develop sophisticated readings and analyses of the many figures with impairment in literary and cultural representation. To that end, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell contend that "literary disability studies proposes an alternative way of comprehending human variation in the archives. Disability has not been absent from the attention of previous eras—far from it. Rather, readers, teachers, and critics have lacked the critical capacity for evaluating the significance of its presence" (4). In part, this "alternative" way of approaching variation invites interrogation of many widespread assumptions, including that physical "normality" exists, that it is desirable, and that deviation from the "normal" should be erased or corrected; that impairment must always be approached primarily as symbolic of internal lack, rather than as material, physical reality; and that the investigation of how physical difference manifests in literature is unambiguous, or somehow a critical "dead end" in that there are only one or two interesting or fruitful ways to approach and analyze disability in literature. I have found that undergraduate students are often surprised by many of these contentions and that, further, they often bring energy and insight to discussions of these issues.

This article is meant to be useful both to teachers of literature who wish to incorporate disability studies perspectives in their classrooms, but who might not feel adequately prepared to do so and who want to resist what Nirmala Everelles has termed a "add-and-stir" approach to disability (93), as well as those who might be interested in invigorating some otherwise stale readings of these canonical texts. The following, then, provides concrete suggestions for teaching a sequence which includes *The Glass Menagerie*, "Good Country People," and Cameron Crowe's 2001 film, *Vanilla Sky*, texts which are linked not only through their representations of disability, but also because they are each centrally concerned with how readers and viewers participate in narrative construction.³ In class, we begin our investigations of each text with a review of our own expectations and of the obvious interpretations before embarking on a deliberate troubling of those interpretations. While neither *The Glass Menagerie* nor "Good Country People" is unproblematic, the power of these similar boy-meets-(disabled)-girl, boy-abandons-(disabled)-girl plot lines resides, in part, in their departures from "the normal": both the female protagonists and the narratives themselves refuse to conform. As all three texts resist the traditional scripts associated with romance, family conflict, and disability,

³ I teach these texts, and others, in a course titled "Composition Through Literature" and I imagine this article has applications in similar introduction to literature courses.

these narratives lay bare well-worn cultural and literary stereotypes surrounding impairment, thus inviting readers to investigate their own beliefs and assumptions about disability and disability narratives. Thus, my overarching suggestion is that successful and productive analysis of texts which incorporate impairment should begin with frank discussion of both narrative expectations generally as well as the specific stereotypes and assumptions surrounding the experiences of disability.

A brief discussion of *Vanilla Sky* follows the analyses of *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People," demonstrating how a generically and thematically dissimilar text also explores audience participation in the making of meaning. In particular, like O'Connor, Crowe confronts audiences' assumptions and expectations regarding certain kinds of characters and certain kinds of plots. Including non-canonical texts of different genres in our studies further demonstrates the prevalence of disability narratives across genre and throughout our culture, as well as the applicability of an approach that brings disability concerns to the forefront in order to explicate, analyze, and critique the thematic and artistic concerns of a text as a whole.

The Failure of the Redemptive Romance in *The Glass Menagerie*

My first goal in teaching *The Glass Menagerie* in the undergraduate classroom is to challenge received or obvious interpretations by drawing out textual moments that complicate or contradict the metaphorization of disability, allowing us to develop more nuanced and sophisticated readings of character and, ultimately, of the play. In addition, attending to Laura, the disabled character's, refusal/inability to perform according to accepted social scripts allows us to discuss the ways in which the play defers audiences' desire for a resolution or a "happy ending" that will resolve the "problem" of disability in the play. While the play's conclusion might remain troubling (the disabled character is isolated and abandoned, a source of shame and guilt for her brother, the narrator), from a disability studies perspective, Laura's position at the end of the play might also be construed as choice and accomplishment.

The Glass Menagerie's plot is fairly straightforward: Amanda Wingfield, matriarch, lives with her children Tom and Laura in a tenement apartment described as "symptomatic of an impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity

and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism" (3).⁴ Laura walks with a slight limp. Determined to secure a stable future for her after she drops out of business college, Amanda resolves to find "somebody to take care of " Laura (35) and arranges for Tom to bring home a "gentleman caller" (41). In the ensuing episode, which Williams describes as "the climax of her secret life" (70), Laura's hopes are raised and dashed and her fate as an "old maid" (10) is apparently sealed when the gentleman caller—who turns out to be none other than Laura's high school crush—reveals that he is already engaged to someone else. At the play's conclusion, we learn that after the failure of Amanda's matchmaking attempt, Tom escapes his family and joins the Merchant Marines.

At first blush, Laura's limp seems an obvious metaphor for her internal state, with most critical interpretations reasserting Williams' apparent metaphor: Laura is "crippled, physically and emotionally" (Howell 45); her "physical flaw" functions to "to represent and to account for the flawed nature of her character. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual flaw" (Clayton 113). I tell my students that these approaches offer valuable points of departure, but that, as many of them are already quite adept at interpreting physical marks as metaphors for internal states, in particular because this is a symbolic currency that they're familiar with and an interpretive move that they've practiced in their academic careers, I expect them to formulate ever-more sophisticated readings.⁵ Thus, our first order of business is to problematize: where and how does this metaphor unravel? Our class investigations, then, proceed to focus on three areas: the description of Laura's impairment, analysis of Laura's character, and analysis of Williams' narrative structure.

Students first must locate and identify moments that may throw the severity of Laura's impairment into question. For example, under "Laura Wingfield" in his Stage Notes⁶ Williams writes: "A childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace. This defect need not be more than suggested on the stage. Stemming from this, Laura's separation increases till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf (xviii).

⁴ In failing to conform in this "interfused mass of automatism," Laura is, as Bert Cardullo suggests, also a Romantic figure: "the fragile, almost unearthly ego brutalized by life in the industrialized, overpopulated, depersonalized cities of the Western world" (Cardullo 1).

⁵ Tellingly, Victoria Ann Lewis points out the students in introductory screenwriting classes are often instructed that giving a character an eye patch or a disability is an effective way to mark him or her as evil; many students are quite familiar with this kind of cultural shorthand. See *Beyond Victims and Villains*.

⁶ There are two versions of the play: the reading version (1945) and acting script (1948); the reading version is referred to in this article.

In class we focus on unpacking how Williams' direction that Laura's "defect need not be more than suggested on the stage," seems parenthetical: she is "crippled" and her "separation" from others is rooted in this "defect," yet the impairment is not truly disabling if it need only be "suggested." Elsewhere, Jim articulates a similar dismissal of Laura's impediment, announcing that Laura "dropped out of school, gave up an education, because of a clump, which as far as I know was practically non-existent!" (81).

Further, the seriousness of Laura's impairment is also cast into doubt during her evening with Jim as Laura becomes increasingly comfortable. She laughs, jokes, and dances, suggesting that her "defect" (xviii) is rather easily overcome. In addition, Laura basically conforms to conventional gender roles: according to Amanda she is "sweet an' pretty" and "domestic" (64) and according to Jim, she is an "old fashioned type of a girl...a pretty good type to be" (72). Thus, ironically, once she feels comfortable with Jim, Laura unintentionally performs the role of the ingénue quite well. The pair sips dandelion wine in the candlelight as they listen to music from a nearby dancehall. In introducing Jim as Laura's high school crush rather than a more generic gentleman caller, Williams constructs a recognizable narrative, the kind that just might conclude with Jim acting as Laura's savior, allowing her to escape her fate as an "old maid" (10). As Williams establishes this possibility only to depart from it, some critics have pointed out that *The Glass Menagerie* functions as a reverse-fairy tale: the kiss of true love, rather than saving or awakening the heroine, apparently dooms her to a life of isolation and loneliness.⁷

In class we test the thesis that is it not in fact Laura's supposed impairment which thwarts the romance narrative. Crucially, it is her body, but not specifically her limp, which prevents Laura from putting on a performance that will fulfill Amanda's plans.⁸ Thus, Laura's

⁷ For discussions of the stereotype that disabled women are incapable of mutually-fulfilling romantic relationships, see Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells, and Dominic Davies's *The Sexual Politics of Disability* and Deborah Kent's "Disabled Women: Portraits in Fiction and Drama" in Alan Gartner and Tom Joe's *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*.

⁸ Similarly, Laura loses control of her body when her achievement is being measured. Thus, she drops out of high school because she "made bad grades" on her final exams (79). In another telling incident, according to Laura's typing instructor, Laura cannot bring herself to take a typing exam: her "hands shook so that she couldn't hit the right keys! The first time we gave a speed test, she broke down completely—was sick at the stomach and almost had to be carried into the wash room" (32). Thus, not only does Laura break down when tested, but her physical inability to type suggests a rejection of the prosthesis—the typewriter—which is designed to generate language unmarked by individuality. The typist is expected to perform as an instrument: the most effective typist is almost mechanized, her personal identity less important than her qualities of accuracy, speed, and indifference. Laura's inability to contain or control her body thus suggests a rejection of the disciplining or mechanization of the body. Her body's

anxiety—she "sways slightly and catches hold of a chair" (54) when she is told Jim is coming for dinner and claims to be "sick" (57) when he arrives—impedes her. Further, even after she is comfortable, Laura refuses to play a role, to perform the part of the "crippled sister" in order to succeed in a marriage market predicated on deceit. The notion that, in the world of *The Glass Menagerie*, love and romance are another form of economic exchange is suggested throughout the play, as for example when Amanda announces that Laura marry, not for love, but to have "somebody to take care of" her and later, when Jim tells the Wingfields that he is punching "a couple of time-clocks": one at the factory and, metaphorically, one with his fiancée (93) suggesting an overlap between emotional/sexual obligations and economic ones. Further, Amanda primes Laura for performance, not only by her elaborate preparations of her own body and dress, but in urging Laura to don "gay deceivers": powder puffs that will serve to disguise the reality that Laura's "chest is flat" (52). When Laura resists, Amanda informs her that: "All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be" (52), suggesting that women's bodies are always-imperfect; once successfully disguised, however, they can be used to trick men into providing commitment and support. In this way, Amanda teaches her daughter that success—and possibly survival—for women in a capitalist-patriarchy is predicated on performance and manipulation.

Amanda's emphasis on Laura's performance begins to reveal the extent to which both the characters (and perhaps the audience) invest in the notion that love and marriage restore meaning and hope in an otherwise cruel and absurd universe. Thus even Jim, perhaps the least-self-reflective character in the play, articulates an awareness of his position in the role of gentleman caller, both when he tells Laura that if he "had a sister like" her, he'd "do the same things as Tom...bring fellows and---introduce" them (89) and when, after telling Laura that she is pretty, he says, "You think I'm making this up because I'm invited to dinner and have to be nice. Oh, I could do that! I could put on an act for you, Laura, and say lots of things without being very sincere" (88). Here, Jim emphasizes that there are socially intelligible behaviors—and limitations on those behaviors—within recognizable contexts. In acknowledging Tom's agenda in inviting him, as well as the possibility that he could manipulate Laura's emotions by putting on "an act," Jim transgresses the social script. Kissing Laura further strains the limits of acceptability: Jim declares it is "way off the beam" (88), not because the kiss is dishonest, but

unmanageability thus forces Laura to exclude herself: she is incapable of competing at speed tests, for grades, or for men.

because it might, according to Jim, be "misunderstood" (89) as the coming-to-fruit of a romance narrative.

Ultimately, then, students might challenge the assumption that, within the context of Williams' play, being physically or emotionally "crippled" is necessarily a bad thing. In other words, Laura may be emotionally and physically ill-suited for successful participation in what Williams portrays as brutal and dehumanizing labor and marriage markets; looked at in this way, Laura's limp and her preoccupations become not only markers of individuality, but potentially radical rejections of a capitalist-patriarchy.⁹ Thus, although Amanda orchestrates a commodification and an evaluation of Laura's body, and although Laura is genuinely interested in Jim, she refuses to wear the "gay deceivers"; she refuses to perform as a "trap" (52). Laura's difference, then, rather than a metaphor that suggests she is emotionally incapable of connecting with others in her society, instead begins to suggest the failures of a conformist society that is unable to connect with an individual who is "strange" or "different."¹⁰

Central to this rereading of Laura's character is a turning away of our attention from the ostensible failures of the character and toward the failures of the larger society; this is a move crucial to any disability studies perspective, which recognizes that physical difference may become disability in a non-accommodating environment and which further suggests that in reiterating received interpretations, we continue to naturalize the thinking that disability is an individual's problem, not a condition created at least in part by social conditions and power relationships.¹¹ Significantly, many critics recognize Tom's rejection of his society—his retreat to poetry, his desire for adventure, and his ultimate escape to the Merchant Marines—as a noble nonconformity, while neglecting to identify Laura's similarities to her brother. That is, attending to Laura as a nonconformist as well, as a character who rejects her mother's mercenary vision without condemning either her mother or her brother, allows us to not only reconsider her character, but to look more closely at some of Williams' overall themes. Thus, this rereading of Laura might serve as a model for the rereading of countless other misfit characters who happen to have physical impairments ranging from limps to hearing difficulties to disfigurements, whose

⁹ In addition, Tom's sarcastic question, "You think I'm in love with Continental Shoemakers?" (23) begins to suggest that, like a prostitute, the laborer performs a duty absent a meaningful emotional relationship with the work.

¹⁰ I am indebted to my colleague Elizabeth Abele for helping me to develop this reading.

¹¹ For further discussion of disability as "not simply an impairment or medical condition, but rather...a culturally and socially organized subjectivity" (Hladki), see Janice Hladki, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and Johnson Cheu.

physical characteristics have too long distracted readers from discussing how these characters' attributes or trajectories contribute to or undermine other important narrative or literary elements.

"Very Unusual for a Girl": The Humiliation of Hulga Hopewell

As we move from class discussions of *The Glass Menagerie* to "Good Country People," we outline the overlaps, as well as the distinct differences in the thematic concerns and depictions of the female disabled figure in each text. On the surface, "Good Country People" is quite similar to *The Glass Menagerie*: single mother pities single daughter; young man calls; romance does not ensue. Further, the protagonist of "Good Country People" has a lot in common with Laura Wingfield. They both limp and they are both single; neither of them participates in the labor force or meaningfully contributes to her household; and they both misapprehend the intentions of their potential romantic-interests. Finally, like Williams, O'Connor constructs a recognizable romance-narrative, only to explode the expectations that accrue to those narratives. In this way, both *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People" are consistent with a larger tradition that often depicts disabled females as either asexual or undesirable¹²; one way to approach these texts is to begin with a discussion of representations of female sexuality generally, of disabled female sexuality in particular (even an inability to brainstorm examples might be instructive), and/or of love-conquers-all narratives in which romance makes the disabled individual's life worth living.¹³

As other critics (and O'Connor herself) have noted, "Good Country People" proceeds, at least superficially, according to a recognizable formula, not unlike a joke: Henry T. Edmondson III has pointed out that the moral of O'Connor's story may be: "roll in the hay with a nihilist and you'll be left without a leg to stand on" (90).¹⁴ At the time of the story, Hulga is thirty-two and a Ph.D. and she describes herself as the type of person who "sees through to nothing" (O'Connor 287). Doctors have informed Hulga's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, that because of Hulga's heart condition, Hulga cannot expect to live past forty-five. As a result, Hulga has returned from the

¹² See Michelle Fine and Adrienne Ashe, *Women With Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture and Politics*, as well as Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells, and Dominic Davies' introduction to *The Sexual Politics of Disability*.

¹³ See, for example *An Affair to Remember* (1957) or *The Piano* (1993).

¹⁴ O'Connor recognizes the story's resemblance to a "low joke" in *Mystery and Manners* (98). Elsewhere, echoing Edmondson, Thomas L. Cooksey points out that O'Connor's story is "dramatizing a pun...that she [Joy-Hulga] doesn't have a leg to stand on" (74).

university to live on her mother's farm. When Hulga's mother invites Pointer, a Bible salesman, to stay for dinner, Hulga treats him with disdain. After a brief exchange, however, Hulga agrees to meet Pointer for a picnic. The two, neither of whom brings anything traditionally associated with a picnic, deposit themselves in a barn loft. Hulga is surprised to find how easy it is to manipulate Pointer: "She had seduced him without even making up her mind to try" (288). However, after insisting that Hulga "prove" she loves him and allow him to take off her eyeglasses and her wooden leg, Pointer leaves Hulga stranded in the barn (288). As he departs, Pointer tells Hulga, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born" (291).

Rather than beginning with an overview of the critical responses, I almost always begin class discussions of "Good Country People" by asking two crucial questions. First, from among the students who are reading the story for the first time, I ask how many of them were surprised by the ending. Then, I ask how many were even vaguely hoping that Hulga and Pointer would fall in love and live happily ever after. It may surprise those of us who have read and reread O'Connor to find that many first-time readers often admit that they were rooting for a romantic resolution. This, I believe, is testament to O'Connor's brilliance: although consistently indicating that characters (and perhaps readers) should be skeptical of generalizations, clichés, and stereotypes, she nevertheless manages to seduce us with a familiar boy-meets-girl narrative. For example, that both Hulga and Pointer have heart conditions might suggest that they are similarly incapable of love, but another reading suggests that the two are somehow romantically linked as when Pointer, alluding to the correspondence, asks Hulga, "don't you think some people was meant to meet on account of what all they got in common?" (284). For the first-time reader, Pointer's question may very well seem to indicate that his entry into Hulga's life will provide her with a companion, ultimately defusing her anger and disruptive potential. Thus, the story's ending is shocking primarily because O'Connor has so deftly introduced familiar plot points, only to reveal to the reader, as well as to Hulga, that she has seriously misread many cues and clues. Further, Hulga—and again, perhaps the reader—discovers just how invested in the myths of "good country people" and even "true love" she actually is. In the final scene between Pointer and Hulga, Pointer declares his love, insists that Hulga reciprocate the declaration, and then asks her to "prove" her love, all moves recognizable from narratives (and poems) that describe a young man trying to convince a young woman to surrender her virginity. It is at this high-stakes moment that O'Connor flips the script on both Hulga and the reader.

Thus, our classroom readings of "Good Country People" focus on how the story dramatizes the unreliability of appearances and categories both within the narrative and for the reader. (That one of Pointer's Bibles contains prophylactics, liquor, and dirty playing cards, literalizes the cliché that "you can't judge a book by its cover"). Nevertheless, the characters in "Good Country People" persist in forwarding judgments based on their knowledge of "types": Mrs. Hopewell knows her neighbor, Mrs. Freeman's, "type" (272); both Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell assume Pointer's transparency as a "good country" person (290). Hulga's flawed assumption that Pointer is "good country people," her refusal to acknowledge another's complexity, is her undoing, the weakness Pointer exploits in order to take advantage of her.

Hulga's failure is particularly ironic given her own defiance of categories: as a female intellectual, an unmarried woman, and an ungrateful cripple, Hulga's conduct troubles easy distinctions.¹⁵ Many critics have pointed out that both Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga mouth clichés (Mrs. Hopewell's are more quotidian; Hulga's more academic); but it is often overlooked that Hulga, instead of embodying a cliché herself (the sick daughter, the uncomplaining survivor, the college graduate who returns to the farm), resists categorization. Hulga insists on self-definition; she clearly rejects the standards of those around her. In Hulga's demand that her mother accept her: "If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM" (245), she refuses others' impulses to define her.¹⁶

In emphasizing Hulga's deliberate nonconformity, O'Connor begins to suggest femininity itself as a performance. In class we discuss how and why Mrs. Hopewell—not unlike Amanda Wingfield—struggles to persuade her daughter to conform to conventional femininity. Mrs. Hopewell forwards clichéd but pointed assertions, telling Hulga that "people who looked at the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not" (275) and that "a smile never hurt anyone" (276); in addition, she tells Hulga to "come pleasantly" across the fields with her or not at all (274). Mrs. Hopewell's pleas make visible both the contours of appropriate femininity as

¹⁵ Thus, Mrs. Hopewell struggles with the unusualness of Hulga's career path: "You *could not* say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.' That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans" (emphasis added, 276). In this way, Mrs. Hopewell fails to acknowledge the historical misogyny of the philosophical tradition, thus ignoring the social systems which prevent or make difficult the active participation of certain individuals. This focus on the individual—Hulga—as misplaced, undergirds Mrs. Hopewell's overall approach to her daughter.

¹⁶ Although drawn to conventionally masculine pursuits, Hulga is unable to fully participate in them. First, she is shot (by her father) while on a hunting trip. Next, Hulga must leave the university because of her "weak heart," suggesting that the rigors of the male-dominated academy would kill her. Finally, when she attempts the conventionally masculine role of seducer of the ingénue, she is tricked and abandoned. The first accident, an accident that occurs when Hulga is in a parent's custody, foreshadows the second taking of her leg by a male she trusts (and who later abandons her). Hulga is consistently betrayed by her body's femininity and fragility.

well as the lies upon which such performances are predicated: a woman should "smile" and behave "pleasantly" regardless of how she is feeling.

While O'Connor suggests that Hulga's attempts at performing femininity are absurd, she also reveals the high value placed on youth, passivity, and innocence in women. When Pointer asks, "You're shy, aren't you, Hulga?," she affirms (284), suggesting the ideal of the demure, modest female (reminiscent, perhaps, of Laura Wingfield). When he asks how old she is, Hulga tells him that she is seventeen (283). Thus, Hulga pretends to youth, a status traditionally associated with dependence, deference, and naiveté. Here is yet another opportunity to ask the class whether or not they saw any "red flags" when reading; that is, did it strike them as unusual that Pointer would believe this thirty-two year old woman is seventeen? Did they think that the Vapex—a nasal spray she applies to her collar—truly approximates perfume? If so, did they assume that because Pointer is "good country people," that he doesn't know the difference between seventeen and thirty-two, perfume and Vapex?

Of course, while Hulga believes she is manipulating Pointer, Pointer successfully manipulates Hulga (and, perhaps, the reader). As they walk along, looking for a spot for their picnic, Pointer gestures to the barn loft and says, "It's too bad we can't go up there"; Hulga's response to Pointer is a "contemptuous look" and she begins to climb the hayloft in order to demonstrate that she will not be hindered either by her femaleness or by her disability (286). It is thus one of Hulga's attempts to behave like a "normal" person that result in the revelation that she is "not-normal."

At this point, it is crucial discuss the nature of humiliation: what it is and what elements make it possible. That is, Pointer's humiliation of Hulga is predicated on the others' discovery that Hulga herself is invested in dominant narratives and the story concludes with a description of Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman observing Pointer's retreat. Mrs. Freeman's remark that "[s]ome can't be that simple" (291) suggests that she, at least, recognizes Pointer's potential for evil; this recognition makes Hulga appear as even more of a fool. Additionally, even if Hulga manages to get down the ladder, how will she explain the loss of her prosthetic leg to these women? Will she tell them that she voluntarily surrendered her independence to "prove" her love? Will she reveal that she temporarily fancied herself a desirable or sexual being? That she is abandoned and embarrassed in part serves to confirm that Hulga is not desirable (at least not in a "normal," non-fetishistic way) and that she has been mistaken in thinking herself so. The potential public revelation of this mistake is humiliating—particularly because Hulga has crafted

a persona based on her rejection of dependency and traditional femininity. That Hulga may have been romantically interested in a young man thus belies the entire persona that she has constructed.

Another important aspect to focus on, however, is that Pointer's behavior's departure from the recognizable narrative serves ultimately to force Hulga to acknowledge and in some ways inhabit the roles traditionally associated with femaleness and with disability. Hulga is made to feel inferior: she is outsmarted, made to look ridiculous and unnatural by her sexual aggression, and rendered dependent. In class, we discuss how Pointer's actions effectively disable Hulga: without her glasses, Hulga's short-sightedness is literal; her prosthetic leg, rather than functioning as a symbol of emotional or spiritual lack, functions as a material need that, when removed, impairs Hulga's free movement and renders her vulnerable; finally, if Hulga's intellect can be read as a spiritual prosthesis—an artificial supplement to compensate for an internal lack—Hulga is informed that she "ain't so smart" after all (291) and her philosophical scaffolding is ripped out from under her. In short, Pointer's actions force Hulga to conform to stereotypes associated with the disabled and with women: she is rendered vulnerable, dependent, sexually objectified (rather than active) and incapable of serious thought.¹⁷

In this way, "Good Country People" enacts the overturning of the expectations it describes: as I've argued, the story's effectiveness in part resides in its surprising conclusion, suggesting that readers are anticipating an alternative—if not altogether romantic, at least less cruel and grotesque—ending. In literalizing the metaphors of disability, "Good Country People" draws attention to the process of reading: how Hulga misreads Pointer, but how the reader too might misread Pointer and the narrative itself. Further, if we as readers already "know" what a wooden leg means, perhaps we will overlook how the leg functions. Discussing "Good Country People" in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor herself writes that Hulga is "spiritually as well as physically crippled" and describes some of Hulga's leg's metaphoric possibilities before going on to remark, "If you want to say that the wooden leg is a symbol, you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first, and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story" (99). O'Connor's remarks are instructive. As we help students in introductory literature courses navigate this text,

¹⁷ Nicole Markotic makes a similar point in her article "Re/Presenting Disability and Illness: Foucault and two 20th Century Fictions," although she emphasizes readers' enjoyment of the "triumph of the uneducated over the learned and of the country bumpkin over the snob." She continues, "Perversely, the story also maintains the status quo by offering the 'average reader' a triumph of the able bodied over the disabled, and of male over female."

and other texts that feature disabled characters and narratives of disability, we bear a responsibility to acknowledge both the symbolic potentialities, as well as the material realities of impairment. That is, if reading Hulga's leg as a symbol of her spiritual lack and need for redemption forecloses on further discussion of what O'Connor is doing and how she is doing it, we have yet again fallen victim to precisely the kind of reductive and clichéd thinking O'Connor critiques in her story.

Foregrounding real-world and literary stereotypes of femininity and disability, "Good Country People" has the potential to reveal to readers that we, like Hulga, are perhaps not as "smart" as we had believed. As I've suggested, then, initiating discussions by asking students to marshal evidence supporting the claim that O'Connor relies on familiarity with conventional romance-narratives thus invites them to attend to how she resists those scripts by alluding to and incorporating them, and asking the reader to recognize his or her own assumptions about the condition of disabled femininity. This approach more generally emphasizes an awareness of how representation can serve to promote or challenge the status quo and of how our readings are predicated on our knowledge of certain types of stories and their expected outcomes.

Finally, any discussion that puts *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People" in dialogue with each other must take place with an awareness of how disabled characters are often written out, erased, or "solved" through death or cure in literary and cultural representations. While the ultimate isolation of both Hulga and Laura is perhaps consistent with a larger literary tradition of erasing and ignoring disability, it is also the result of each protagonist's inability—or refusal—to perform conformity. In depicting disabled females who resist others' attempts to define them and to determine their futures, both texts draw attention to the limited and limiting scripts associated with representation of disability. As scholars and teachers, we too can resist those limiting scripts by calling attention to facile metaphorization, developing counter-readings that expand interpretive possibilities, placing disabled characters at the center of our analyses, and including and teaching a disability studies perspective as a fruitful critical approach.¹⁸

¹⁸ In an interesting counter-reading of another of O'Connor's stories, Carl S. Horner proposes that a character functions as a metaphor for lupus, a disease. See "Misfit as Metaphor: The Question and the Contradiction of Lupus in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.'"

"It Seemed Like Science Fiction to Me": Responding to Representations of Disability in Popular Culture

In "Accessing Disability: A Nondisabled Student Works the Hyphen," Margaret Price cautions against pedagogical approaches wherein "readings by disabled authors may be added uncritically to syllabi, while a more substantive approach to the questions raised by disability is not included." The goal, according to Price, is "not simply to include disability, it is to include disability studies." Incorporating texts such as *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People" without critical attention to their handling of impairment might actually reinforce injurious stereotypes. Instead, I have suggested that teachers direct students to focus on how impairment functions in the narratives, as well as how much the narratives depend on viewer's and reader's familiarity with impairment-as-metaphor strategies and oft-circulated narratives of disability.

Thus, the above texts lend themselves to disability studies counter-readings not only because each depicts a protagonist with an impairment, but also because each text defies narrative expectations, thus troubling ideas of the "normal" or "natural" as well as bringing into focus just how much work a reader or viewer does in interpreting, filling in the blanks, or anticipating a narrative's direction. While many other canonical texts prominently feature disabled characters—within 20th century American literature alone, one might look to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Sun Also Rises*, Raymond Carver's "Cathedral", and much of O'Connor, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Morrison's work—and while still others defy or problematize narrative expectations, another text I have found fruitful to introduce in a course investigating representations of disability is Cameron Crowe's 2001 film *Vanilla Sky*. *Vanilla Sky* forwards an epistemological argument concerning the role of the external world in our imaginations: Crowe suggests that our cultural imagery profoundly shapes our understandings and expectations. Thus, in his DVD commentary on the film, Crowe contends that pop culture artifacts function as "signposts...in our lives. Our favorite movie...an album cover...a vision of fatherhood that came from Gregory Peck. I think all that stuff is lodged in all of our minds" and that *Vanilla Sky* is "about how pop culture invades our life and our minds." Here, Crowe claims that the culture we consume begins to actually constitute our internal lives, a statement he enacts in the plot of *Vanilla Sky*, peppering the film with visual and aural allusions. Many of our initial class discussions focus on identifying and explaining those allusions, with two goals in mind. First, I suggest to my students that despite their obvious differences, *Vanilla Sky* and "Good Country People," in particular, both draw attention to our potential complicity in stereotypical and

sometimes damaging myths about both romance and disability. In *Vanilla Sky*, for example, the audience member might find herself surrendering to a love-conquers-all type-narrative which draws on the fairy tale of the "beauty and the beast" in which a patient and kind female is rewarded for seeing past a (wealthy) male's physical imperfection and bad behavior. Just as in our discussions of "Good Country People," I ask students if they wanted the love story in *Vanilla Sky* to come to fruition and whether or not they registered any clues suggesting that the romance itself might be untenable or unbelievable. The second question we pursue, inextricable from the first, is how and why *Vanilla Sky* explores—and explodes—the most recent manifestation of the myth of science as a cure for all of our ills. That is, *Vanilla Sky* references and, I suggest, mocks, all those medical miracle narratives that present procedures such as "reconstructive" surgeries as incredibly effective, basically accessible, and relatively painless.

Vanilla Sky is long—136 minutes—and the plot is complex: although he claims innocence, rich playboy David Ames is in jail for his girlfriend's murder and the narrative frame is the series of interviews he has with a psychologist who is attempting to understand what "really" happened. The film begins as a straightforward redemptive romance (dissolute playboy finds a nice girl to settle down with), but is interrupted by an accident in which David is disfigured and disabled; the romance he had just begun with a woman named Sofia comes to a halt. David argues with doctors, asking them to "play jazz" and restore his face and body to its former perfection, but the doctors grimly inform David that his money doesn't make a difference: his injuries are such that he will have to endure headaches, a limp, and disfigurement. However, David's life takes another turn: he overcomes his anger and depression, takes control of his family's company, and wins Sofia back. Then, as David tells us in a voice-over: "what happened next was surreal. That same arrogant bastard, Dr. Pomeranz, called me. Suddenly he was my new best friend...He said he'd discovered a new form of reconstructive surgery with a doctor from Berlin." David confesses, "It seemed like science fiction to me" and "Obviously, I was suspicious," but, when his bandages are removed, David's conventionally perfect physicality is restored.

There are several more plots and complications which I will forego describing here. However, near the end of the film, the psychologist breaks David out prison in order to investigate and solve the film's mystery and David discovers that, beginning at his reconciliation with Sofia, everything has been a "lucid dream": literally the dream life that he wanted for himself, cobbled together from all the fantasies and images and narratives he has consumed

depicting what it is like to be in love, successful, and happy.¹⁹ All is revealed during an explication-heavy scene near the end of the film.

Ultimately, the miraculous cure is a story that David himself constructs, just as the story of a redemptive romance with Sofia is assembled from the romance narratives he has consumed, including an image from a Bob Dylan album cover and the French film *Jules et Jim*. Crucially, the audience is implicated in this narrative construction, as we too construct an intelligible story from the information Crowe provides. For example, a recreation of the *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* album featuring David and Sofia walking down a cobblestone street can potentially function on three different levels: first, one might recognize the specific allusion but still understand the image as a representation of the traditional narrative of falling in love; second, one might recognize it as an allusion, or that Crowe is deliberately drawing on the album cover; and third, one might recognize that both Crowe the director and David the character are alluding to the album cover. In this way, even the audience member who does not realize she is watching a "dream" might begin to suspect the constructedness of the narrative itself. A second-time viewer is most certainly hyper-aware of how much the intelligibility of David's story relies on flashes of images meant to communicate large amounts of information, clichés, familiar fairy tales, and improbable, but oft-used cinematic-type coincidences.

In short, David's dream is a composite of the various myths, narratives, and images about romance, disability, and success that we—both David and the audience—have consumed. Like the audience, perhaps, despite his reservations—events are "surreal," "like science fiction"—David suspends his disbelief in order to move forward in the narrative he is unconsciously constructing. In this way, Crowe's film, with all of its improbable twists and turns, reveals to the audience the limits of its own credulousness.

I have found it enlightening, then, that my students often announce that although they were skeptical of the psychiatrist's decision to take a man awaiting trial on a field trip outside the prison, and that they have even more difficulty believing in or accepting the concept of cryogenics, that they had less of a problem believing in the result of David's reconstructive surgery. More precisely, many do find it surprising and, because we are focusing on representations of disability, the students are primed to interrogate the depiction of David's impairment and cure. However, the idea that medicine can provide the answers, that facial

¹⁹ *Vanilla Sky* is a remake of Alejandro Amenábar's 1997 film "Abre los Ojos"; I limit our discussions to the Crowe film because it is directly addressing and responding to American popular culture and, in particular, representations of disability in American culture.

reconstruction is easy, painless, and perfectible is a plotline that many of us are accustomed to and which, although my students say they find it unrealistic, is not a "deal breaker" in the sense that it immediately reveals the narrative as the stuff of dreams, fantasy, or science fiction. We are bombarded with narratives suggesting the endless potential of reconstructive surgeries and medical interventions: from Christopher Reeve's Nuveen Investments commercial, to the reality television show "The Swan," to an episode of Grey's Anatomy (which I take to be representative) in which a surgery to separate formerly-conjoined twins is presented as relatively straightforward and easy to recover from²⁰, many don't bother to question this well-worn plot-line when it appears in our mass media. To be clear: it isn't necessarily that the students found David's reconstruction plausible; what they found irritating or challenging was that the film itself suggested that they shouldn't believe it possible, that the film seems to demand that the viewer question what it was presenting. That is, the imperative to "open your eyes," repeated throughout the film, isn't directed solely at David, but at the viewer as well. Crowe asks his audience to be skeptical of narrative developments that characters themselves announce "seem like science fiction."

If Crowe's film can teach us anything, then, it is that our media has done an excellent job of naturalizing a number of problematic narratives related to disability: on the one hand that disability is essentially devastating, and on the other, that illness, age, and impairment are all manageable, if not reversible, if an individual is determined (and affluent). Further, and problematically, Crowe's film uncritically promotes "better-dead-than-disabled" thinking as, despite his career-gains, David nevertheless opts for a "lucid dream" rather than his existence as a person with a disability. *Vanilla Sky's* reliance on this narrative thus allows us to further discuss the tradition of representing suicide or assisted suicide as a reasonable and/or noble choice for a disabled individual.²¹ That, rather than continue to pursue Sofia or to move on in his romantic life, David chooses to remove himself from the narrative (through suicide), suggests that his character, like Hulga Hopewell, is forced to accept that his impairment disqualifies him from romantic love.

Crowe's film asks us to attend to how the narrative participates in and builds on those other narratives, asking us recognize and potentially interrogate our assumptions, our knowledge of the ways movies are supposed to work. Like O'Connor's story, Crowe's film

²⁰ Titled "Don't Stand So Close to Me," the episode aired on November 30, 2006.

²¹ Notable examples include *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *The Sea Inside* (2004).

reveals to us just how vulnerable we are to certain types of myths and certain types of happy endings. I have taught *Vanilla Sky* alongside of *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People" successfully; that is, students have made exciting and often surprising connections between these narratives. Foregrounding the repetition of certain themes, including the representation of romance-as-performance and depictions of the experience of impairment, allows for rich discussions. More generally, however, I feel that each of these texts invites us to explore both the stereotypes and metaphors that have become so attached to disability representation as to seem "natural," and, in this way, these narratives can help us to establish some of the concepts and approaches that we can use as we continue to navigate other canonical and non-canonical texts in a course or unit focused on disability representation.

However, discussions of depictions of impairment and disability are crucial even in classes not focused on disability representation. *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People," in particular, remain key texts in many American drama and literature courses because of their literary importance, because of each author's enduring influence, and, finally, because of the artistic achievements of each text. One of these achievements, I have argued, is each text's complexity; *The Glass Menagerie* and "Good Country People" offer multiple interpretative opportunities to each new generation of students and critics. As I suggest above, however, the critical readings and, I suspect, classroom discussions, have stagnated as a widespread acceptance of impairment as metaphor for a character's internal failing and/or larger social ills have emerged as the default approaches to these texts.²² While there are merits to these interpretations, particularly as they have been developed by earlier critics, we do a disservice to the literature and to our students when they foreclose on further discussion. Instead, the use of a disability studies approach foregrounding the problems and possibilities that depictions of impairment present, rather than seeking to "solve" the impairment through metaphor, can better serve the literature and our students as we develop ever more nuanced and sophisticated readings of these worthwhile texts.

²² See Donald E. Hardy's *The Body in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: A Computational Approach*, in which Hardy uses linguistics in order to investigate O'Connor's use of the "grotesque" body, for an interesting exception.

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