

Normalcy and Deformity in the Victorian Novel: A Disability Studies' Perspective

Abstract:

There are, nowadays, a wide range of cultural and theoretical fields that allows those who are critically engaged with literature to approach seemingly over-theorized concepts, such as the human body, from new and engaging points of view.

In this paper I seek to address two popular Victorian novels through the theories at work within the contemporary field of disability studies. This area of literary criticism places the human body as a powerful representational construct in which whole ideologies can be placed through disability, while at the same time arguing how disability in literature is used as a multi-purpose tool. I will especially focus on Lennard J. Davis's theory of the concept of Normalcy being an idea developed around the human body in the Nineteenth century (Davis 4-5).

Victorian cultural and pseudoscientific ideologies about the body being a surface in which the individual's personality could be read are commonly represented in the period's fiction. In the Victorian novel, especially, these popular ideologies were often at the core of moral and anxiety-producing elements. Two of the most clear examples of this are Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In these two novels, the immoral or the sinister are represented through bodies that are characterised by their physical otherness or deformity, as evidenced by Mr Hyde's bodily and ever present "impression of deformity" (Stevenson 13), and Dorian Gray's painted body's "misshapen body and failing limbs" (Wilde 139).

In doing this, my aim is to expose how the literary representation of bodies whose sinister features are directly related to the concept of deformity can be read, in terms of disability criticism, as comments on the moral and scientific discourses of the period. This will show, hopefully, the extent of Victorian fiction's influence in contemporary attitudes towards different bodies, while at the same time offering an insight in the current state of a relatively newly-emerged theoretical field that works towards a new understanding of culture: Disability Studies.

References:

Davis, Lennard J. 'Constructing Normalcy'. *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Stevenson, Robert L. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.

Bio note:

Manuel Hueso Vasallo is a PhD candidate at the University of Málaga (Spain). His research interests include the Victorian Novel, the representation of the human body in the Nineteenth Century, and Disability Studies. His current research deals with the relationship between othered bodies, Victorian pseudoscience, and the Victorian popular novel.