

## Narrators and Legs: Representing Bodies in the Victorian Novel

### Abstract [paper]:

From the last decades of the twentieth century onwards, the representational value of the human body in literature has been an important component of literary criticism. In the field of Victorianism, for instance, many of the most significant literary studies carried out during the 90s deal with the body. Seminal studies such as Anne Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings* (1992), a re-definition of Sensation Fiction and its perceived dangers, and Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996), a mapping of Victorian psychology in literary texts, have had the body, both of readers, characters, and authors, at their core. This is hardly surprising when we consider the sheer amount of different bodies that are represented through the pages of Victorian novels. Indeed, the literature of this period offers a wide range of samples to emerging critical fields that, much in the same sense as Cvetkovich's and Shuttleworth's studies, focus on the body's significance. One of these fields is Disability Studies, whose main aim is the exploration and definition of disability as a socio-cultural construct. But, how can the literary representation of disability in the Victorian period be relevant to contemporary criticism, and to our own understanding of the human body?

In this paper I seek to re-address Victorian novels by positioning the theories at work within Disability Studies alongside Victorian popular (pseudo)scientific notions of the body, to show how a methodology that uses this seemingly anachronical combination of frameworks may be, in fact, interdependent and beneficial to study the concept of the body, and relevant to a re-thinking of Victorian texts. In doing this, I seek to value the (disabled) body as tool through which to look, in a new way, to certain characteristics of the Victorian novel, while at the same time offering a sample of the potent and culturally deep representational constructs that I seek to re-assess by using this tool.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which this New Historicist approach to Victorian theories of the body, combined with Disability criticism, may help us to re-assess Victorian fiction's representational complexity, and the body's ever-changing constructual potential, I will examine a novel written by a popular Victorian author. Almost all the works, indeed, of Dinah Maria Mulock, are filled with different kinds of disabled bodies that, in some way or other, shape the narrative. By examining, however, her novel *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), and more specifically, its narrator's body, and placing it alongside other Victorian fictional representations of the human body, such as those present in George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879), I shall point out how the (disabled) body, is a place where gender, sexuality, science, and cultural anxieties, are commented, challenged, or re-shaped. The dichotomy between Victorian notions of ableness and disability essential to my analysis of the novel is, I shall argue, relevant to understand not only Victorian fiction and society, but also its representational codes, and the way in which it has influenced our own critical notions about the body.

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### References

Cvetkovich, Anne. *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

Shuttleworth, Sally. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

**Keywords**

Victorian Fiction; Disability; Pseudoscience; The Body; Dinah Maria Mulock