



Disability Representation in J. Albert Mann's *The Degenerates*

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how disability is represented in J. Albert Mann's *The Degenerates* (2020). It highlights the issues encountered by individuals with disabilities and the role of society in reinforcing negative ideas about people with disabilities. Mann's *The Degenerates* criticizes the sterile mindset embraced by society and the norms commonly accepted by society that define ableism/disability. In addition, it addresses important issues such as "societal perception," "normalcy and perfection," "stigmatization," "ableism," "eugenics," "distorted self-perception," "marginalization and exclusion," and "resistance." The analysis reflects the effect of society's crooked malpractices towards people with disabilities.

Keywords: *disability, disability fiction, normalcy, stigmatization, ableism, resistance, and narration.*

Introduction

J. Albert Mann was born in Jersey. A writer with a disability, she is also one of the pioneers of young adult fiction. Her works include *Sunny Sweet Is So Not Sorry* (2013), *Sunny Sweet Is So Dead Meat* (2014), *Sunny Sweet Can So Get Lost* (2015), *Sunny Sweet Is So Not Scary* (2015), *Scar: A Revolutionary War Tale* (2016), *What Every Girl Should Know: Margaret Sanger's Journey* (2019), *The Degenerates* (2020), and *Fix* (2021). She has an MFA, Master of Fine Arts, from Vermont College of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults. She is a disability activist and an award-winning poet. ("J. Albert Mann" n.p.).

J. Albert Mann's *The Degenerates* tells the story of four young women incarcerated in the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded, a terrible place. These girls are Maxine, Rose, Alice, and London. The novel describes

their life in the Institution where they continuously suffer from vicious bullying of malicious girls treating them as abnormal. They are even labeled by the doctors of the Institution as morons, imbeciles, and idiots. The novel delves into the girls' past life to show the causes of being brought to this institution as well as highlighting societal attitudes toward them. For example, Alice is forced to live in the institution because she has club foot. Seen as abnormal/disabled, Alice is rejected by her brother who brings her to the Institution. Similarly, Being Italian and lonely, London is raped and dragged there because of her unexpected pregnancy. The novel condemns the miserable life the girls have in Massachusetts Schools because of their disabilities. Mann's *The Degenerates*, indeed, depicts the painful life of four young women in the early 20th century who are rejected by their society for several

causes that intersect together. They are seen as victims not only of disability but also poverty, racism, gender and marginalization. In other words, they are locked up by a world that takes the poor, the disabled, and the marginalized and institutes them for life (Mann and Quattlebaum, 00:3:13-00:7:10).

The Degenerates focuses on the representation of disability and its various facets. For example, Mann depicts diverse forms of disability and intersects them together to show the effect of the negative attitude of society towards disability, particularly eugenics, and suggests means to resist. *The Degenerates* shows how stigmatization, exclusion, marginalization, and other societal attitudes such as bullying, and racism can have devaluating effects on people with disabilities. The novelist also expresses her optimistic vision that such negative societal attitudes depicted in the novel as atrocities committed against helpless characters can be overcome by resistance. Indeed, an analysis of *The Degenerates* proves that disability is not a physical disease but a societal problem. Concepts such as normality or abnormality should be reconsidered after reading Mann's novels to ensure that people with disabilities have the right to have appropriate jobs, education, marriage, and a true life. It is worth mentioning that even though the events of the novel occur in 1920, it is still informative and beneficial regarding the pressure people with disabilities experience because of society's perception.

Research Questions of the Study

Focusing on how disability is represented in fiction, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the major concepts and theories of disability?
- What are the general features of disability fiction?
- How far can Mann's *The Degenerates* be considered an example of disability fiction?
- How is the image of disability portrayed in the novel?
- Has Mann's *The Degenerates* managed to transform the false perceptions of society towards people with disabilities?

Analysis

Disability is "not an attribute of an individual, but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment. Hence the management of the problem requires social action, and it is the collective responsibility of society at large to make the

changes necessary for full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of social life" (W.H.O. 28). Disability can be physical such as amputation and sclerosis, mental such as Down Syndrome, invisible such as psychological and moral issues. Remarkably, disability relates to major dilemmas such as eugenics, bullying, normality, stigmatization, exclusion, marginalization, ableism, dehumanization, negative self-image, and resistance. These concepts are utilized to analyze the nature of disability and how society is the major reason for perceiving disability as a problem. Consequently, the suffering of people with disabilities is unleashed.

Approaches to Disability

Normalcy and Perfection

The first approach to disability is normalcy and perfection. It means that if an individual does not match the supposed criteria of normalcy, he is different, i.e., disabled (Davis, 00:14:53-00:16:33). In fact, the vast majority of people, including those who think themselves normal, according to this concept, may not be normal. Davis explains that the majority of human beings are average regarding how perfect a certain characteristic is. Only a minority of people are roughly perfect (Davis, 00:15:53-00:18:33). Similarly, Durkheim argues that disability is as normal as ability. He believes that if there are norms of body capacity, dozens of supposed normal bodies and minds will not meet these norms (qtd. in Titchkosky, 00:05:29-00:06:31). In his *Enforcing Normalcy: Deafness, Disability, and the Body*, Davis criticizes the concept of normalcy. He connects the notion of normalcy with other ideas of improvement and eugenics, which is a movement that intends to reduce the existence of "unfit" people. These unfit people are, for example, disabled people, specific races, and people who suffer from poverty.

Oppression and Dehumanization

Oppression is a keyword in critical disability studies. Burghardt argues that theorists should create an "in-depth analysis of the structural and as-yet incompletely understood psychic underpinnings of oppression" (13). She adds that critical disability theory opposes all cultural institutions that support oppressive thoughts. Horkheimer asserts that theorists must pay attention to the notion of "the human bottom of non-human things" (xiii). Similarly, Pernick argues that in the past, people used to leave babies with disabilities to die because they believed that they were evil beasts or "non-human". Furthermore, Beecher cites, in his "Ethics and Clinical Research", a series of real cases in which hideous human experimentation has been made on people with

disabilities. One of these human experiments is feeding live hepatitis viruses to disabled residents of a state institution to study the progression of the disease without any problems because they count them as disabled, in other words, interchangeable. Medical researchers justify their awful deeds by claiming that it is for the goodness of humanity and that “even if a few lives were sacrificed along the way, humanity would be better for it in the long run” (Hoeftler and Kamoie 120). This notion is blatantly obvious in Mann’s *The Degenerates*.

Ableism

According to Campbell, “ableism” is also a major focus of “critical disability theory”. Ableism is defined as discrimination against people with disabilities due to their disabilities (*Contours* 5). According to McGuire, “Disability marks different bodies in different and relational ways; systems of ableism come into contact with racialized bodies, ... classed bodies, gendered bodies, bodies that already have been touched by other (and perhaps multiple) systems of oppression” (n.p.). It is an elemental behavior that prioritizes the characteristics that Garland-Thomson describes as “normate” and, at the same time, marginalizes and excludes the non-normative body and minds (*Extraordinary* 9). For example, some parents worry that Ms. Burnell’s one missing hand scares children. A father talks about the possibility that it would give his daughter nightmares and a mother says that her two-year-old girl should not watch because she would think the presenter has been hurt. Hence, Ableism can be defined as a set of ideologies and malpractices that create a specific corporeal vision of self and body and adopt it as the perfect image of a fully human.

Philosophical Approach to Disability

A further approach to disability is philosophy. Michel Foucault and others provide significant thoughts on “critical disability theory”. Foucault analyzes the concept of power, which undergirds the notion that disability and impairments belong to the same category. Similarly, Tremain argues that they “draw on Foucault in order to scrutinize a range of widely endorsed practices and ideas surrounding disability, including rehabilitation, community care, impairment, normality and abnormality, inclusion, prevention, genetic counseling, accommodation, and special education” (Tremain 2–3). Davis, for instance, explains the difference between impairment and disability. He states that impairment is “a physical or mental limitation, lack, inability” when disability is “the effect of discrimination or lack of accommodation against people with impairments” (Davis, 00:12:41-00:13:16). In this

context, “people are disabled by society not by their bodies” (Shakespeare, 00:07:50-00:07:52).

Ontological Approaches to Disability

Ontology is closely pertinent to critical disability studies. Interrogating the ontology of disability, Titchkosky and Michalko, for example, argue that receiving disability as a “problem” leads to more restrictions and obstacles to people with disabilities, particularly, the “requirement for explanation and amelioration” (127). Since being identified in an intolerant society is a “social necessity that is also a social pathology” (Alcoff 66), it is truly offensive to identify people with disabilities and label them as unhealthy identities. Seeing disability as a problem leads to the disturbing fact that people with disabilities feel the urgent need to explain their nature all the time and try to justify their disabilities because no one understands the ontology of disability in the first place. Titchkosky and Michalko argue, “This approach permits us to ask, what sort of problem do contemporary times need disability to be? And, what is the meaning of human embodiment that grounds the unquestioned status of disability as a problem?” (127).

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a crucial facet of disability as it provides important strategies that help retheorize disability. Dohmen, for example, uses Kristeva’s theory of “abjection” to examine the marginalization of people with disabilities. He argues that her theory reuses Lacanian analyses to study disability (1-2), particularly, the role of others in seeing ourselves. Abjection is a concept in critical theory that refers to the separation from norms of society and morality. It challenges traditional and cultural concepts (Childers 1). In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva describes abjection as the feeling that is related to the repressed “corporeal reality” that is created during the process of breastfeeding (Horkheimer 244). Consequently, a child represses a personal negative opinion about his body, which increases directly after the separation from the other, who is the mother. This separation leads to the feeling of being rejected. Therefore, a person starts to have insecurities about how he is perceived by others or society. Kristeva’s concept of abjection, in turn, is pertinent to how people with disabilities see themselves and how they are affected by the opinions of others. Thus, it is not “the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, and order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4).

Disability Studies

Linton states that “Disability studies” are investigations conducted to analyze and evaluate concepts regarding disability to:

Weave disabled people back into the fabric of society...as full citizens whose rights and privileges are intact, whose history and contributions are recorded, and whose often distorted representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed. (518)

Disability studies examine both the disability of body or mind and the social norms that determine who lacks these supposed norms of perfection to be marginalized and stigmatized (Schalk n.p.). This cruel attitude toward people with disabilities affects their life patterns. For instance, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who suffered from ascending paralysis, facial paralysis, bowel and bladder dysfunction, numbness, and hyperesthesia, tried to hide his disability because of stigmatization. He used leg braces to hide his disability (Alter 355). Stigmatization is unbearable and irresistible, particularly at that time, to the extent that even a president tries to hide his disability to avoid stigmatization. Furthermore, even in the present time, there are still labels and badges. People with disabilities are often described as, “retarded minds”, “autistic people”, “mentally disordered”, and “a child who suffers from learning difficulties”. Hence, Shakespeare argues that such a “diagnosis” is harmful because it creates both stigmatization and illusional problems. He further explains that it is “part of the problem not the solution” (Shakespeare, 00:08:16-00:08:47) because it cruelly badges people.

Such negative concepts have a serious impact on people with disabilities, which, in turn, form their self-image. Garland-Thomson argues, “Identity-based critical enterprises have enriched and complicated our understandings of social justice, subject formation, subjugated knowledge and collective action” (“Integrating” 1). Criticizing traditional social human rights and that those with disabilities are powerless people, the intersectionality of disability emerges in disability studies to describe the forms of oppression and the challenges that those with disabilities have to face (Erevelles and Kafer 218). For instance, Erevelles explains that theorists must analyze disability regarding intersections that involve multiple categories such as “race, class, gender, nation, and [...] identity” (Erevelles and Kafer 219) that face the same oppressive social attitude.

Intersectionality of Disability Studies with Other Theories

Feminism, Critical Race Studies, Postcolonialism and Disability

Critical disability intersects with other theories particularly feminism, critical race studies and postcolonialism. For example, in her analysis of feminist disability, Garland-Thomson argues that “disability-like gender- is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment” (“Integrating” 4). In this way, disabled women suffer from marginalization, discrimination, exclusion, and inferiority practiced by society and culture. Similarly, Disability Critical Race Studies are related to race studies and ableism particularly when it comes to issues such as oppression, power relations, pathology, exclusion, stigma, and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1241). Ghai, for example, analyzes the impact of the hybridized nature of culture and politics on the lives of people with disabilities. Moreover, theorists such as Annamma, Conner, and Ferri relate Disability Critical Race Studies to the experience of education of “undocumented disabled persons, especially young girls” (Annamma et al. 49). Critical race and disability studies are also related to postcolonialism. McKenzie, for example, argues that intersectionality helps illuminate the oppression South African people with disabilities suffer from. For example, economic oppression affects the lives of black people with disabilities socially and politically. Ghai asserts that culture adopts such an attitude. This is reflected in Mann’s *The Degenerates*.

Disability Fiction

Disability fiction is defined as a genre fiction that is concerned with “the exploration of how disability is conventionally narrativised” as it “enables the creation of representations which act as a powerful catalyst for readerly reflection” (Cheyne 2). It also intersects disability with other oppressed categories that relate to race, color, and gender. Like disability, these categories share the same oppressive elements because of the cruel social assumptions of being normal and abnormal.

Disability fiction can give voice to individuals with disabilities. For example, Kahlo, in Anne Finger’s *Call Me Ahab* (2009), explores acute communication processes and authentic experiences, by promoting a narrative that relates speech to silence (Finger 12). Moreover, disability fiction can be a good method to criticize society’s attitudes and governmental institutions which make the lives of

people with disabilities were miserable and even intolerant. For example, in *The Almosts* (1926), MacMurphy argues that the suffering of those deemed "feeble-minded" in American institutions in the 1920s should be illuminated in fiction. MacMurphy illustrates that people and state authorities should be more aware of the inner lives and emotional health of people with disabilities residing in state institutions.

Davis also states that by "enforcing normalcy", the novel used to mark the illusory norms of society as it has portrayed the assumed "abnormal" people to support dominant notions of normality about racism, classism, post-colonialism, feminism, gender, and disability ("Constructing Normalcy" 12). For example, nineteenth-century novels, according to Davis, help reinforce the notion of norm and normalcy by placing protagonists in an ordinary normal frame, while giving marginalized roles to disabled characters. For example, Tiny Tim is a marginalized character in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Likewise, Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610) is marginalized. A few contemporary authors decide not to follow this pattern. In an interview with Jean Jenkins, she argues that a disabled young man is deliberately chosen as a major character because she "needed somebody appealing but vulnerable. And also it is part of the crux of the whole story" (qtd. in Beauchamp et al. n.p). Dee Dee, the main character, sees a 'hot' guy in a 'hot' car. She admires him. She gets used to seeing him around town but she does not find out about his disability until the first day of school when she meets him in the hallway. This makes disability the main focus of the novel. The author aims to help the reader stop connecting disability to ugliness.

Young Adult Fiction

Young adult fiction is also concerned about the impact of society's perception of disability. For instance, in Alison Gervais' *The Silence Between Us* (2019), deaf teen Maya, who craves to discover her true self, experiences a conflict with her sense of self-worth and values, when her new acquaintances and classmates start intruding into her ideas about what it means to be deaf. Another prominent instance is Jase Ellison, in Kati Gardner's *Finding Balance* (2020), who hides having acute lymphocytic leukemia as nobody knows about his illness, not even his Atlanta West Prep colleagues to move on and live naturally without being affected by the negative reaction of society. Therefore, the role of society regarding disability is a main concern in young adult fiction.

This paper attempts to analyze the representation of disability in Mann's *The Degenerates* (2020). The novel

focuses on the suffering of people with disabilities, its causes, and its effects on their characters, in addition to criticizing society's attitude towards them. In doing so, the analysis will also rely on the different approaches and features of disability studies and fiction previously explained to show how far Mann's *The Degenerates* can be considered an example of disability fiction.

Society's Perception

Mann skillfully depicts the crooked values society adopts regarding disability and how such wicked values have a hectic impact on people with disabilities. In *The Degenerates*, Mann presents the cruel perception of society that results in the offensive labels that were stuck on people with disabilities during the 1920s. *The Degenerates* tells the story of four girls who are segregated due to their disabilities. The four protagonists are intelligent, punctual, and empathetic, however, each is labeled as an "imbecile", "moron", and "idiot". These labels are determined according to the norms of physical and intellectual standards adopted by the doctors, supervisors, and attendants in the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded. The name of the institution also deems all the segregated girls "feeble-minded". This shows the superior attitude society adopts. People with disabilities are perceived as "aggressive and potentially violent, retarded, weak, sluggish, slow, antisocial, and physically unattractive" (Jacoby et al. 173). This attitude also shows that no matter how people with disabilities refuse these labels, "nobody is listening" (D 5). This denotes the way they are perceived and treated. It also represents their suffering while living according to society's values.

Normalcy and Materialism

An analysis of *The Degenerates* (2020) shows how people with disabilities are judged according to society's norms. Indeed, society has set certain concepts of perfection and normalcy that determine the perception of people with disabilities. *The Degenerates* sheds light on the notions of normalcy and materialism adopted by society and how these notions determine the behaviors of the supposed normal people towards people with disabilities as inferior to them. For example, the institution presents the three intellectual ages for the three labels as female "imbeciles", which is Rose's diagnosis, "could mentally reach the age of seven, and might end up in either the dormitory or the Sick Ward" (D 19). "Morons" are at the "mental age of twelve" (D 19), while "idiots" are at the lowest mental state as they "would never grow mentally past the age of two years old" (D 19). It is worth mentioning that these diagnoses can be stuck to anyone who is judged by society

to deserve segregation. Any girl may get any label no matter how her mental state is. Moreover, doctors and attendants have the authority to change the type of label at any time moving them from the mental state of “moron” to “imbecile” to “idiot”. Shakespeare argues that such labels result in feeling different, which is psychologically excruciating for people with disabilities because they want to be seen like anybody else without badges or labels. They do not want to be perceived as sick people who have medical problems (Shakespeare, 00:09:44-00:13:11).

Oppression and Dehumanization

In *The Degenerates*, people with disabilities are severely oppressed and dehumanized by society as they are considered unable to physically or psychologically feel like “normal people”. For example, Dr. Fernand believes, “Idiots of the lowest grade seem to have no feelings at all” (D 61). He explains to his visitors that even though “they have a human origin” (D 201), they “are insensitive to hunger, cold, and pain” (D 201). Proving his point of view, he goes to Miriam’s crib and pinches her hard. He dehumanizes the baby just because she is large-headed. The criteria Dr. Fernand uses to determine humanity is provocative because he relates ability to being human. Siebers describes this notion as a “baseline by which humanness is determined. The lesser the ability, the lesser the human being” (10). In this way, society dehumanizes people with disabilities assuming that they are incapable of feeling or comprehending because of their disabilities.

Stigmatization

In *The Degenerates*, the name of the institution, which is the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded, illuminates how stigmatization is a sustainable label. Once an individual is segregated in the institution, he/she immediately gets the label. Consequently, this stigmatization reflects how society perceives the segregated girls paying no attention to their feelings. For example, when Rose asks Miss Barrett, whom Rose assumes to be a nice superintendent, about the reason why the paths go in circles, she answers, “My dear, the feeble-minded body is lacking a vital force. The paths circle to remove decision or choice” (D 76). The people in charge of the segregated girls believe that the girls cannot make simple choices such as determining which way to go. Moreover, the superintendent’s words show that she does not care about the negative impact of her words on Rose. Even outside the institution, Alice suffers from stigmatization. Alice’s clubfoot has become a shame that at the age of seven, she starts to hear brutal comments in the street. For example, when Alice goes out with her brother’s pregnant wife, she hears a stranger loudly say,

“Pray to the Lord this next one don’t come out tainted” (D 16). This comment shows the cruel perception of society and how such words can dramatically change the lives of people with disabilities because after uttering such words, her brother decides to institute her saying that it is “for the best” (D 17).

Ableism

Stigmatization leads to discriminating against people with disabilities denying them their rights. *The Degenerates* represents brutal external ableism. The inmates do not get proper health care when they are seriously sick. For example, when Rose is critically sick burning with rheumatic fever for a month, no one looks after her as if they urged her death. She is never better until London finds her because the first thing Rose says to London is that she is thirsty. What makes it worse is that, in the room which is full of patients, London does not find water or a nurse to ask for help. So she anxiously looks for a nurse and asks her to give her a glass of water and she indifferently tells her to use the sink and stick her “head under the faucet” (D 178). Remarkably, society denies poor people the right of having health care, therefore, London’s parents die because “Sickness whisked people away from you in an instant”, particularly if they are poor and disabled.

In addition, the right to have proper education is not affordable in the institution. The girls have been segregated for years and never use “a pencil or paper” (D 14). For instance, Alice can “feel herself slipping, unlearning things she’d once known” (D 106) because “stitching hems and washing bedsheets didn’t help you learn”. They never care about education believing they would never be able to learn because of being disabled females. In this way, Society expels all different people denying them their humanity, which necessitates laws that stand for those violated people who may suffer from a disability, poverty, gender, or racial discrimination. These laws aim to benefit devaluated people, particularly, people with disabilities “at the level of the self; in the family; at school; at work; in local, national, and international politics; in the social realm; and in the cultural realm” (Pue 13).

Eugenics

Society believes that eugenics is for the goodness of humanity to get rid of “unfit” people because, as Osgood argues, “less fit members of society seem to breed fastest and the right types are less prolific” (qtd. in Rosen 3). Consequently, those who join eugenics organizations are highly respected because they are perceived as heroes, who were born to save humanity. For example, in *The*

Degenerates, Dr. Fernald receives great respect even though he is a lunatic criminal. Under his supervision, babies are left alone to die. Society decides to brutally study the bodies of dead babies with disabilities to impede disability. Doctors utilize their bodies for scientific experiments and justify their deeds that they serve the globe. For example, knowing about the atrocities of the experiments, London is shocked and miserable. She sadly asks about the reason they use them as experimental organs. She condemns them asking, "When they say we are incurable. Why would they cut us up? Are we that horrible that locking us away isn't enough?" (D 206). Gladys says that they do these experiments to prevent disability. Her answer shows the cruel perception of society. They believe people with disabilities "need to be prevented" because they are "mistakes of nature" (Bogdan vii) that should not be repeated. Creating a utopian society, Noyes, a eugenic scientist, invites such experiments to breed better children calling this procedure "human stirpiculture" because society should always be "in favor of intelligent, well-ordered procreation, which is unavoidable in the marriage system" (qtd. In Rosen 6). That is why when the visitors come with Dr. Fernald, they are afraid to deal with or touch any of the babies because they are "unsure of themselves in this environment, and only feeling safe when standing behind the doctor" (D 202). Yet, they stare into each crib as if they were in a museum.

Bullying

In *The Degenerates*, Bullying is a hideous consequence of being a person with a disability due to the ineffable circumstances of the institution. Since crying is forbidden, it is also a sign of fragility, which immediately stimulates bullying. For example, Alice shields the crying Maxine so that Bessie and Ellen do not notice the tears in Maxine's eyes because "crying was a sign of weakness, a sign to attack" (D 189). Even simple eye contact may induce trouble, therefore, London pretends to close her eyes "knowing the eyes of the attendant were focused on her" (D 34). *The Degenerates* illustrates how the system of the institution unleashes bullying as the attendants turn a blind eye to the atrocities that occur in the institution. For example, Bessie and Ellen, two physically strong segregated girls, do "terrible things to the girls who the lady was mad at" (D 25). No one of the girls is protected as "anybody could be hurt by Bessie and Ellen" (D 26), particularly if any of them shows a sign of weakness or oddly behave. Bullying is a paramount issue regarding disability that needs to be conveyed by the writer as fiction is meant to show stark reality providing the reader

with the required information to provoke solutions because "if we accept the convention that fiction has some mimetic relation to life, we grant it power to further shape our perceptions of the world, especially regarding situations about which we have little direct knowledge" (Garland Thompson 10).

The Intersectionality of Disability

The Degenerates depicts the suffering of its main characters as caused by the intersection of disability with race, color, and gender. For example, In *The Degenerates*, London has experienced a hard life, which can be illuminated through news such as "Your father is dead," "Your mother is dead," "The orphanage is full," "The foster family doesn't want you," "The gas has been shut off," and "There is no food" (D 93). She would never have experienced such a life if she was white. Another example is the Irish girl London meets at The Fernald School. The girl is deemed a "moron" only because she is an Irish girl who is "most likely Southie" (D 92-93). Society considers her origin a sufficient reason to institute her "for life" (D 93). Non-white women suffer from discrimination as they are treated "without respect, targeted for violence, and denied positions of responsibilities and power" ("Understanding Disability," 00:00:00-00:02:14).

Furthermore, being black provokes oppression. For example, Alice and Mary, the only black girls at the institution, are treated differently. The white bullying inmates consider them monsters, which is why Alice and Mary are never attacked by bullying inmates in the institution because they are "Negroes" (D 26). No one attacks them because they are afraid of them. Both Alice and Mary are regarded as monsters because of their skin color.

Moreover, being a man, Alby is not punished as London for making London pregnant. His male-dominated society does not consider him morally disabled. In addition, being a white man, he has the power to subjugate London. According to his society, Alby is "a sensitive white boy who might allow himself to fall for a dirty dago girl from the streets, but he didn't have follow-through" (D 151). Furthermore, the masculine values that consider men to be always innocent while women are merely prostitutes who should be spontaneously imprisoned and instituted, particularly if she is black, poor, or disabled should be reconsidered.

Exclusion

According to *The Degenerates*, exclusion is forced by society as the girls are isolated from the external world for a lifetime. For example, the report Alice reads explains, "Whatever improvement may result, the expense and the

trouble are thrown away if the child, later on, is tossed out into the world without being able to protect and care for herself. Therefore, protection, shelter, and care of Alice must be lifelong and permanent” (D 45). The doctors, attendants, nurses, and superintendents believe that the girls cannot be reliable or autonomous and need sustainable protection, which gives them authority and deprives the girls of all their humanitarian rights forever. Society outside the institution does not want to see, deal with, or be with them because they are the type of people “the world didn’t have any use for” (D 257). In addition, even when visiting them inside the institution, the world does not care or deal with them, so it segregates them in the “dreaded therapeutic chambers called “the cages” or “the Back Ward, where not a single visitor had ever stepped foot” (D 100).

Marginalization

People with disabilities are not often regarded as the priority of society. People, who are in charge of the institution, for example, care about the building of the institution more than they care about the segregated girls with disabilities. More attention is paid to the grass that is “cut nice” and the brick buildings that are “loomed, large, and impressive” (D 34), whereas there are “wet holes” in the ceiling above the girls’ heads. They do not notice the “worn-out boots” (D 34) on their feet. The girls are forced to work hard every day despite their physical impairments, therefore they “d fall deeply asleep before she’d even finished saying “Dear Lord.” (D 123). Hence, society’s attitude supports excluding and marginalizing people with disabilities, which is why the novelist sheds light on such negative practices.

Ontology of Disability

Viewing disability as a medical problem, society ignores its disability, which can trigger serious consequences for people with disabilities. *The Degenerates* reveals several types of society’s disability. For example, Maxine’s mother is emotionally disabled even though she does not have physical or mental disabilities. She does not know anything about her daughters even though they live together in the same house. Having Down Syndrome, Rose does not get any help from her mother. She and Maxine are never burdens to their mother because they have “never given their mother a moment of distress. They’d always looked after themselves” (D 122). However, she decides to get rid of them because she is emotionally disabled. As a mother, she is supposed to have warm emotions and compassion toward her children. Ironically, London, who is deemed morally disabled, acts as a loving caring fastidious mother to the babies in the

Sick Ward, similarly, devoid of human compassion, doctors, nurses, matrons, policemen, superintendents, attendants, and even the old man with the gun, who chases London during her elopement, are emotionally disabled because none of them humanly treat the segregated girls.

Impairment

Tremain tries to defamiliarize notions such as “disabled people”, impairment, and even categorizing disabilities (Foucault 93). She discerns that both disability and impairments are consequences of power relations. According to *The Degenerates*, impairment is perceived as a disability by society’s culture. For example, Lizzie and Frances do not have disabilities, however, they are perceived as ones and finally instituted. Frances is not a person with a disability. She only has hydrocephalus because of having excessive amounts of cerebrospinal fluid, which is the liquid that is supposed to protect the brain and reduce the sense of how heavy the head is. Lizzie is large-headed because of the excessive liquid in her head but she is not disabled. She only suffers from “headaches, vomiting, [and] blurred vision,” (D 268). Yet, she can do everything, however at her pace. She only suffers from impairment in her body functions. Another example is Frances, who has rheumatic fever, which is an “inflammatory disease that can develop a complication of strep throat or scarlet fever” (D 269). It also causes pain in the body joints such as knees and elbows. This pain causes weakness and slowness during movements, which causes an impairment, not a disability, however, Frances is deemed feeble-minded and is disabled by society. In this way, impairments are classified and perceived as disability because people with impairments are also disabled by society.

The Impact of the Malpractices of Society on Mann’s Characters

Distorted Self-Perception

The instituted girls suffer from distorted self-perception because of society’s misperception. They even feel gratitude for being insulted. For example, arriving for the first time in the institution, Alice kisses the hand of the nurse because she nicely says, “As a moron, Alice would be able to attain a level of usefulness to society” (D 19). The nurse does not support her with care, advice, or knowledge to get gratitude, yet she labels her as a “moron” once she sees her. Because of suffering from a negative self-image, Alice is grateful to her. Another sad example is how London lets Alby sleep with her just because he is a sympathetic liar. She loves the false “interested look in his eyes” (D 35) telling him about her biggest secret, i.e., the reason her name is London.

Therefore, society's perception and concepts create a negative self-image, which detrimentally induces the skewed behaviors of people with disabilities.

Additionally, inner insecurities stem from such a deformed self-image. To illustrate, the characters, in *The Degenerates*, show signs of internal insecurities. They crave to feel safe in such a judging environment. For example, Rose cannot sleep without tightly holding her stick. Moreover, Rose and Maxine have become attached and take care of each other to feel safe because they never judge each other. For example, trying to make Rose sleepy, Maxine whispers "something into Rose's ear and gently ran her hand over the girl's eyes" (D 37). London also has a different stick. Her stick is the beautiful book she has taken from the nurse. The book secures her because it helps her feel that she is still a human who can read. Reading a book helps her stop abjecting herself as the book is a sign of hope and self-satisfaction, which is why London reaches "for her book and pulled it close to her, just like Rose had done with her stick" (D 157), and becomes an avid reader, who finds herself getting lost in the pages of her only precious book. In addition, Rose is also a stick of London because London neither has friends nor trusts anyone. Rose has become her first friend because she shares precious moments of understanding with her. They read the book and plan for London's elopement together. Thus, London loves Rose because she makes her feel accepted. In this sense, not only do an unjust society's malpractices trigger wary behaviors, but also they result in internal insecurities regarding human beings, especially people with disabilities.

Self-stigmatization

Self-stigmatization is depicted in the way characters with disabilities feel ashamed and unworthy of trust, love, care, acceptance, respect, and true life due to external ableism. For instance, Maxine believes that she does not deserve to work as a nurse in the Sick Ward because she is an "imbecile" even though she realizes that she is not. She asks London why she is not allowed to work as a nurse. Yet, "she absolutely knew why she wasn't allowed to work" (D 190) there. She does not protest because she believes that she is not qualified to work there despite her ability to look after her sister for four years. In this way, stigmatization affects the self-representation of minor gender and disabled people (Gerschick 1263–1268).

Internalized Ableism

Internalized ableism is portrayed through Alice's subjection. Adopting society's values of ableism, Alice gives up her happiness and accepts humiliation adjusting her life to all the atrocities that happen to her. She

surrenders to the terrible social values adopted by all the people, who are in charge of them because she thinks this is what she deserves being a person with a disability. She never thinks about elopement because she has "no place to go and no money to go with" (D 47). Indeed, she believes that she does not deserve a free life. Moreover, when she reads the report of her physical and mental state, she just "ripped it to shreds. Tiny, tiny shreds. Shreds that she plucked from the floor and stuffed into the old diaper from an inmate she hadn't yet washed" (D 46). In other words, she discriminates against herself embracing passive rejection. She never opposes this perception or tries to learn anything that may develop her skills. She also allows her reading skills to fade away, which is why she could read before being instituted and lost this skill after four years of segregation because she adopts the notion that she is unworthy of proper education. This shows that internalized ableism hideously impacts the quality of lives of people with disabilities.

Exclusion Consequences

Affected by society's cruel decision to exile people with disabilities, the girls, in *The Degenerates*, have become unaware of the external world. For example, even though Alice knows how the world inside the institution works, she does not understand "much about the world outside" (D 103). Maxine also asks London a primitive question that illuminates how she is completely ignorant about trivial information in the outside world. She asks, "Have you ever seen an airplane take off?" (D 107). London answers and they are stunned listening to her, which means that they completely lose connection to the outside globe. Remarkably, exclusion may make social and interpersonal skills fade away.

Defying Society's Values

Resistance

Despite the negative attitudes towards Mann's characters, they are courageous enough to defy their milieu. Mann develops her characters by focusing on how they resist exclusion, stigmatization, and oppression, i.e. society's perception. In *The Degenerates*, for example, London and Rose display other aspects of the supposedly "disabled" girls, which defy the norms of society. For example, London can estimate each situation she has to face. She knows what when and how to utter and act. She decides to cooperate with the nurse and answer her foolish offensive questions because she does not want to be "placed under as much supervision" (D 30). Rose also can recall information and events. For example, she tells London about the details of the map and recall the events of the last Christmas party when she sees it. Rose explains, "To

find Trapelo the lady had moved her finger past the gymnasium on the map, and then past the administration building. Once on Trapelo Road, Rose said, the lady had moved her finger down” (D 139). Rose gives London a meticulous explanation of her memory. She also decodes the puzzle of the old woman telling London about her intention to move to Chicopee and that she may be waiting for her. Mann subtly shows what people with disabilities are capable of. Hence, the writer, in her *The Degenerates*, condemns society for segregating them in the first place and rejects displaying disability as a problem or tragedy, whereas it can be perceived as a ‘positive identity’ (Cheyne 9).

Elolements

In *The Degenerates*, elopement is a recurrent motif that reflects the characters’ resistance of the imprisoned life they lead in the Institution. For example, London decides to elope on the first day she is instituted. She carefully explores the place and plans to escape because she wants to challenge the social values not only of the institution but also those deeply rooted in her mind. That is why she observes every detail in the institution and realizes that “they were on the second floor that faced the front of the building [...]. Her group included the two thugs London already felt were the only reason to stay the night” (D 33). Therefore, she decides to leave directly after the two attendants sleep. London realizes how precious freedom is as “the bits of blue sky she could see made her itch to be out there, running” (D 90) to guarantee a decent life for her baby, who should come into the world without being stigmatized because she knows, “her baby wasn’t a moron. She wouldn’t let it be” (D 116). In other words, elopement is a method to oppose society’s attitude toward people with disabilities, who reject such procedures that support segregation, ableism, and judging them.

Friendship

Goffman discusses mechanisms of overcoming society’s malpractices focusing on the importance of the moral tendencies that reinforce the management of interpersonal interactions in public institutions. (qtd. in Titchkosky, 00:07:44-00:08:54). Social integration can be a way people with disabilities use to get their lives back. In Mann’s *The Degenerates*, friendship, for example, is strong even though it is short. London and Rose have become friends from the first day they meet because they share the same oppression and misery. Rose helps London leading her to the window that she can silently open so that no one notices her elopement. She also worries about London and her baby calculating that he is “coming in the springtime” (D 156). Similarly, London is a loyal friend.

She loves Rose and wants to leave a souvenir to remember her, so she puts her precious book under Rose’s pillow before she elopes. Moreover, when London comes back to the Institution, she looks after Rose even though she is also sick. Both are close friends who love and care for each other. Hence, friendship in Mann’s *The Degenerates* is generous and lively even though they have known each other for only two weeks.

Mann’s *The Degenerates*: Narrative Technique

In *The Degenerates*, Mann combines elements of both postmodernism and realism. She provides the reader with real documented events and information flavoring them with excruciating drama to escalate the impact of her works on the reader showing the miseries, trauma, and suffering of her characters with disabilities. Employing effective devices, the reader authentically understands disability and identifies with Mann’s characters with disabilities.

Non-linear Narrative Structure

The non-linear narrative structure is a postmodern device that is used to narrate events out of the chronological order of their occurrences (Kim 1). In *The Degenerates*, Mann uses a non-linear narrative structure to show the reader how the dark past is a painful legacy on the shoulders of girls with disabilities in the institution. For example, the reader gradually knows about Alice’s past life before being instituted by her brother and how her life has been “a series of things she’d had to do—leave school, clean for the neighbors, take care of the children of her brothers—and knowing ahead of time what those things were didn’t change anything” (D 16). In this way, the reader realizes that both the past and the present of Alice are depressing, which is why Alice never thinks about leaving the institution because she has grown to be a submissive character. Moreover, seeing London coming, in the police wagon, to the institution for the first time, the writer narrates the details of how the institution has viewed Alice since first day, how she has been astonished seeing “the massive brick buildings presiding over great expanses of lawn” (D 16), and how she has been shy and petrified that her brother unusually takes her hand so that she can climb the steps even though he never helps her before because she does not need help in the first place. Mixing the past of Alice with the present of London, Mann shows that the pain is never healed because it is renewed every time a new girl with a disability is instituted. Mann also illuminates that all girls with disabilities experience and share the same misery that relates to the institution and society’s perception.

Multi-perspectivity

Multi-perspectivity “includes in true postmodern manner existential, epistemological, ontological, as well as comical, parodic, self-ironizing viewpoints” (Hoffman 288). Mann, in *The Degenerates*, adopts a multi-perspective narrative. To illustrate, the irreconcilable perspective of society and that of characters with disabilities regarding how people with disabilities should be seen are elucidated. For example, describing girls with disabilities, Dr. Fernald thinks, “The moron is a most dangerous element to the community. From a biological standpoint she is an inferior human being. It may sound harsh, but it is scientifically objective” (125). He also looks down on them believing that they are incapable of understanding due to their disabilities. He says to Maxine, “I don’t believe you’re understanding me” (125). Mann also allows her characters with disabilities to repudiate such concepts. Proving herself, Rose says, “I understand stuff” (118) asserting, “I’m great at remembering things” (117). Even though Mann uses a third-person narration, she effectively allows room for her characters with disabilities to express themselves through first-person Monologue. This way, not only does Mann show the unjust view of society, but she also gives voice to those with disabilities to defy such implausible thoughts.

Furthermore, characters with disabilities narrate and express their hidden tragedies and miseries. For instance, the reader realizes Alice’s suffering when she tells about the betrayal of her brother instituting her because of her clubfoot at the age of seven. Alice never tells anyone how she ends up in the institution because the truth is too excruciating to be said. However, she tells Maxine her own story after escaping from the institution. She says, “My brother, he said, ‘Come on, Alice.’ That’s it. Just, ‘Come on,’ but I figured it was bad. I figured whatever happened next was going to change everything” (253). Using the multi-perspective narration, the reader roams in the girls’ minds to realize their devastating stories, agonies, and how they have absurdly ended up in the institution. The writer adopts the concept, “the novel form necessarily raises questions about empathetic identification, multiple coexisting viewpoints on and stories about disability, and who is given the authority to narrate” (Hall 71) to enhance the reader’s understanding as he/she views disability from different perspectives and various narrations.

Historiographic Metafiction

Since “one of the first obligations of a writer is the presentation of truth” (Baskin and Harris) in disability fiction, historiographic metafiction is employed by the

writer. Historiographic metafiction is defined by Hutcheon as “works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures” (qtd. in Hoffman 17) to help the reader understand the pernicious impact of the real painful wicked malpractices that have occurred in real life. In *The Degenerates*, Mann is inspired by real events that occurred in 1920. Mann argues in her “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel that “All of the discriminatory statements made by doctors and nurses in this novel were actually written by doctors and nurses in real life” (D 265). She uses the doctor’s exact utterances, which are registered in documented reports changing only pronouns when needed. Therefore, the meticulous offensive report written about Alice that she tears out into tiny pieces is real. Furthermore, Mann uses real segregated characters registered in the same documents and reports, where “only the notes of medical professionals and researchers remain” (D 266). Using historiographic metafiction, the writer provides the reader with real information and expands his knowledge, which prevents him/her from any short-sighted or misleading notions. She also gives the reader the impression that what she narrates is significant and worthy of his/her attention.

Audience Surrogate

Another narrative device is the “audience surrogate”, which is defined as a narrative device that “allows the audience to experience the story through their eyes, [...] enabling them to emotionally connect with the narrative” (Feccomandi n.p.). In *The Degenerates*, Mann shifts the role of the audience from the reader to the characters of the novel. For example, the old lady is an audience to society to show how the world is perceived by the “degenerates”. By doing so, the reader can see the world from the old lady’s perspective, who spends most of her days watching and reflecting on the world through her window. Similarly, the reader sees the world from London’s perspective, i.e. “People are crap” (D 5) because “Nobody’s listening” (D 5) to the high sounds of the world’s atrocities.

On contrary, the institution, a microcosm of society, is an attentive audience to segregated girls with disabilities, who are observed day and night to write down the tiniest details of their bodies, movements, and behaviors dealing with them as ruined products. Ironically, the attendants, nurses, and doctors never become audience to themselves because they think they are perfect. Remarkably, using various audiences reflects that “presenting the story through the eyes of a relatable character, the narrative becomes more accessible to a wider audience” (Feccomandi n.p.).

Metaphor

A metaphor is defined as a “figure of speech, based on qualities common to the two entities that can be identified and compared, and used primarily for aesthetic or rhetorical purposes” (Richie 5). Being a writer with a disability, Mann effectively employs metaphors. In *The Degenerates*, for example, metaphors are used to convey the devastating emotions of segregated girls with disabilities. Mann skillfully relates the girl “in the iron lung” (D 1), who used to live with London in the orphan house, to London’s feelings. The girl in the iron lung is also related to London’s pregnancy. Even though “one had nothing to do with the other, [...] she couldn’t help connecting them” (D 1). London feels that she and her baby are stuck in the world just like the girl in the iron lung, who is encased in a machine that “was pushing air into and pulling air out of her lungs, tethering her to life” (D 1). Like that girl, London imagines she is “there, curled up inside the lung” (D 9) every time she faces a hard situation. The girl in the iron lung is used by Mann to express how much London is suffocated dealing with all the disappointing situations she has been through.

The title of the novel is itself a metaphor for the double standards society adopts. Mann condemns society, which allows the attendants, doctors, and nurses to be furious at the segregated girls when they do not walk fast enough or shiver with cold. It punishes girls with disabilities when they cry due to physical pain or scream in anger because they cannot bear it anymore. She also criticizes how the supposed normal people have the right to be emotionally attached to their families when girls with disabilities are segregated alone away from their own. Mann juxtaposes these two irreconcilable conditions of being perceived as normal and degenerate to illustrate what is truly meant by the title of the novel and how it feels to be one of “the degenerates”.

To conclude, as an example of disability fiction, Mann’s *The Degenerates* raises issues that are of paramount significance to people with disabilities such as the philosophical and ontological facets of disability, the intersectionality of disability, externalized and internalized ableism, stigmatization and self-stigmatization, exclusion, marginalization, normalcy, eugenics, and dehumanization. In doing so, Mann adopts effective narration to raise the emotional and mental awareness of the reader. Indeed, reading *The Degenerates* helps reshape society’s perception of disability. As an example of disability fiction, it manages to provide the reader with better access to the suffering of people with disability and the necessity

of granting them their human rights and integrating them into society.

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