

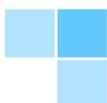
Disability and Desirability: A Study of Gendered Disabled Identity in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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Abstract

Unlike his contemporaries who perceived disability as an individual defect, James Joyce presented an alternative viewpoint towards the people with disabilities. Issues related to sexuality and gender in “Nausicaa”, chapter 13 of *Ulysses* attracted Joyce scholars as a major critical focus, but discourse on disability as an important part of significance was absent. Disability Studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field that looks at disability not only as a medical condition but as a result of socio political and cultural marginalization. Early elucidations of this chapter have centered on Gerty's powerlessness and Bloom's objectification of her body. My analysis perceives Gerty not as a passive victim but highlights her agency in the scene. The author depicted his disabled character as both sexually desirable and desiring which is a denial of the traditional consciousness that disabled people are either sexually deviant or asexual. Through the character of Gerty MacDowell, an unconventional erotic sensibility is established that focuses more on pleasure rather than on copulation or reproduction. To understand how disability functions in *Ulysses*, it is very important to differentiate between the defacement of Gerty's limp and the disability imposed on her by society and Bloom's male gaze is also very crucial in this aspect. This paper aims to apply disability outlook and interrogates the rudimentary acceptance of gender, desire and sexuality and also provide an analytical perspective how gender is performative.

Keywords: Disability, Gender, Desire, Objectification, Male gaze, Performative



Like gender and sexuality, the concept of ability is also culturally constructed. Most modern writers act towards disability as a defect and often they use disability to represent social adversities through their writings. But in “Nausicca”, chapter 13 of *Ulysses*, James Joyce has proposed an alternative and positive outlook with Gerty’s self-assured confidence. Joyce reversed the convention of deploying main protagonists in rhapsodized terms- as powerful, muscular, courageous, attractive, alluring, righteous etc.- and hailed notice to the confidence and dignity of the average men and women who in spite of their hardships try to survive, sustain and relish life.

Most literary critics conclude that Gerty is less feminine, wretched, doleful, miserable and doomed to maidenhood because of her limp. For instance, Deborah Kent describes Gerty as a distortion of femininity and asserts that, “Because of her disability, her efforts to lure a man are cruelly doomed” (52). Vike Martina Plock furthermore asserts that “Gerty’s defect singles her out for a different future from the one desperately desired” (129). Plock also proposes that a transformation is waiting for Gerty that is the “change from a young maiden into a vindictive and cynical old spinster” (127). Some commentators contend that Gerty strives to remunerate for her “defect”. Accepting this viewpoint, Suzette Henke advocates that Gerty “compensates for bodily deformity by heightened pride in physical attractiveness” (“Nausicaa” 155).

However, I will show how Gerty does not consider her limp as a “defect” and how she is victorious in “becoming the object of male attraction that she aspires to be” (McLeod 100). As a young beautiful woman, Gerty has very few choices in her life except to find a partner, but she fantasizes between owning a cordial marriage and owning a fellow who praises her sexually. In modern culture “female body has become a goal to be achieved through self-regulation and consumerism” (“Integrating” 10). Following the able-bodied standard, Gerty fashions herself to look more attractive and also tries to hide her impairment. Despite this disability, Gerty continues to be hopeful in her excellent grace and is able to attract the attentiveness of Leopold Bloom. Within the background of Dublin community, where half of the female population was single, the argument on Gerty remaining single because of her impairment requires to be thought about (Gifford 6). As she has the ability to captivate both the attention of Wylie and Bloom, she also has the potential to find companion. And she is not the only woman who remains maiden in her group, her friends are also unmarried. So, Joyce here basically tries to break the stereotypical standards of female beauty.

The Girl Who Can by Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo is a story of a girl who struggles to wipe out the stigma of disability put by the patriarchy. The protagonist was born with long and thin legs which is considered to be bad for woman in the society. Her grandmother always states that a woman should have a big leg with good calves to support solid hips. And a woman should have solid hips to be able to have children. The protagonist Adjoa is termed as a disable character and worthless in the society. So Adjoa struggles to prove her worth despite having long and thin legs. She enlisted her name in the running competition and finally wins. She does not only win the race but also wins over her disability. What is more important to note that she was never ashamed of her body rather redefines her weakness into her strength. Similarly, Gerty also never felt ashamed of her body and challenged the conventional notion towards disability.

As social and cultural conventions still believe that disabled people are either sexually deviant or asexual, most literary critics are unable to think that Gerty considers

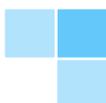
herself as an appealing woman. In examining issues related to gender, one should depend on her own understanding of what it implies to be “feminine” or “masculine”. In present time, it is acknowledged that such concepts are not stable. Famous critic Judith Butler mentions that “[G]ender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts”, and this “intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler 4). If we attach disability in the gender issue, it becomes more complicated. Commenting on masculinity Adam S. Miller and Thomas J. Gerschick mention that “the body is a central foundation of how men define themselves and how they are defined by others.... Men’s bodies allow them to demonstrate the socially valuable characteristics of toughness, competitiveness, and ability”, and so the bodies of disabled men “serve as a continual reminder that they are at odds with expectations of the dominant culture” (183). For women with disabilities a similar situation is mentioned:

[They] have not been forced to get married or to subordinate paid work or childbearing or housekeeping. Instead, they have been warned by parents that men only “take advantage”; they have been sterilized by force or by “choice,” rejected by disabled and non-disabled heterosexual and lesbian partners, abandoned by spouses after onset of disability and thwarted when they seek to mother. (Fine and Asche 29)

It is noticeable that in spite of her disability, Gerty places herself positively in connection with her culture’s governing standards of gender identity. Gerty MacDowell welcomes the cultural description of womanhood. From various sources like novel and magazine advertisements, she looks for guidance for accepted appearance and behaviour and then hides her impairment to meet standards.

Unlike Woolf and Hemingway, James Joyce does not present impairment as an obstacle to relationships. Joyce concentrates on the noble characteristics of simple women and men and demonstrates physical disability just as another problem of life that can be overcome and endured. As recorded by critics, the novel *Ulysses* is constructed along the lines of Homer’s epic *The Odyssey*, where Bloom is positioned for Homeric hero and Gerty’s character is similar to Homer’s Nausicca. This character is one of the first of many icons from which Joyce created Gerty. Here Joyce, by portraying Gerty differently from the accepted norms, refuses all the glorified forms of female beauty and advocates “imperfect beauty” who strives for identification among the paradoxical standard of contemporary culture. In *Ulysses*, Bloom sees Gerty sitting on a rock by the seashore at the end of a day in Dublin. Gerty is very beautiful and also wants to get married like Homer’s princess. Gerty knows the significance of proper fashion but, rather carrying royal attire, she is dressed like “a votary of Dame Fashion”, a follower of fashion consultant in a woman’s magazine (Joyce 455). Bloom arrives to Gerty as a stranger and “dream husband” (465) but he converts the encounter into a significantly more explicit meeting in which Bloom masturbates when Gerty displays her body for him. But Gerty was not as perfect as Nausicaa, Gerty appears to be “lame! O!” (479), and sexual desire of Bloom rapidly shifts to pity and shock. The abrupt and unanticipated occurrence of disability disturbs both Bloom’s imagination and the narrative.

Lennard Davis depicted the point of time when Bloom spots Gerty’s impairment as “a specular moment”, when “the power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore”, and the moment at which a “person with an



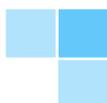
impairment is turned into a disabled person by the Medusa-like gaze of the observer” (12). In this incident, Bloom’s gaze immediately points Gerty not solely as a lady who walks “with care and very slowly” (Joyce 479), but as a handicapped woman who deserves compassion and pity. But if we look beyond the viewpoint of Bloom, we can notice that Gerty is deformed solitarily by response like this. This impairment only limits her mobility. There is no implication that her wound leads to her suffering. She has seemingly no hardship travelling the lanes of Dublin to buy things for her father. Here Joyce does not talk about the social barriers that Gerty might face in that city but Joyce’s locus is on Gerty’s desire to attract a male. Joyce, through this novel, questions the prejudices that are present in their culture against disabled women by introducing Gerty as a sexually desirable and desiring woman and by response from having pity to a wish to encounter her again.

Though Gerty performs as chaste maiden, her meeting with Bloom permits Gerty to vanquish society’s moral forbidding and entertain herself in the sexual conduct she desires. She learns to be the focus of male devotion by both the church and magazines she reads. Gerty tries to seduce the men she meets as the models try to attract male attention. She always hangs between two thoughts – having a husband and having an admirer. I think, from Gerty’s perspective, her impairment is a less important issue to her than her issues related to class, deficiency of knowledge, her father’s drinking etc. Her disability is not the main reason that she cannot find a suitor, her impairment becomes only one among many.

Nemecek exhibits, “Like the non-disabled Irish woman of her time, Gerty engages in the ‘career’ of self-beautification”, but also asserts that Gerty “maintains some distance from the project of normative femininity” (194-95). Gerty is not interested in the little ones but she performs her ethically accepted role as a feminine figure. At home, Gerty behaves “just like a second mother” to her own mother (Joyce 461-62) and she considers her deed for Bloom as a woman’s duty to be a “comfortress of the afflicted” (466). Moreover, Gerty accepts all the gorgeous standard that are advised by the magazines rather than refusing prescriptive norm of femininity. She also hides her impairment because, as Davis mentions, “it remains unrepresented by beauty tip columnists”, and is, consequently, “not ‘feminine’” (129). Gerty does not only follow the standard norm of feminine beauty but she also utilises the chance to reproduce the provocative posture that the able-bodied models assume.

When Gerty raises her skirt for the first time “a little but just enough”, it is solely to kick the ball (Joyce 463), but after realizing that Bloom observes her, she takes pleasure and glee and starts to swing her legs swiftly and more swiftly which can be elucidated as a commixture of exhilaration and sensual arousal. Then she reclines, grabs “her knee in her hands” and exposes “all her graceful beautifully shaped legs” (476). Those advices, of using proper skin treatment and display their undergarments, work for Gerty as she follows those appropriately, and Bloom masturbates in response to this.

As Gerty realises, she has passed over her ethical limit, she travels across all the possible excuses. Ultimately, Gerty justifies her sexual excitement by condemning it on menstrual cycle: “beside it was an account of that other thing coming on the way it did” (476). Finally, nevertheless, Gerty enjoys the sexual encounter and at the same time she admits that Bloom and she are being indecent: “she wasn’t ashamed and he wasn’t either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn’t resist the sight of the wondrous



revelment half offered loke those skirt dancers behaving so immodest before gentleman looking”(477).

“Nausicaa” comprises mainly of soliloquies by Leopold Bloom and Gerty MacDowell. The passage starts with the youthful woman sitting on the rock sands the initial part closes with her swaying her legs and gesturing indicatively for Bloom. Bloom does not move toward Gerty, but masturbates while observing her. Lately critics have proposed that there is a sexual insinuation in swinging her legs:

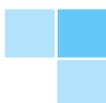
[she was] trembling in every limb from being bent so far back that he had a full view high up above her knee where no-one ever not even on the swing or wading and she wasn't ashamed and he wasn't either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn't resist the sight of the wondrous revelment.... She would fain have cried to him chokingly, held out her snowy slender arms to him to come, to feel his lips laid on her white brow, the cry of a young girl's love, a little strangled cry, wrung from her, that cry that has rung through. (477)

Philip Sicker also points out that Gerty also “experiences an orgasm” and she restrains and obtains delight from her pretentious display. As Sicker mentions, when Gerty “leans further and further backward, she is ‘trembling in every limp’”, and “the pressure of her ‘nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin,’ contributes to an orgasm” (“Unveiling” 93). Sicker further writes down that she is fully conscious of her spectator and takes pleasure in “her power to tantalize Bloom through veiled bodily disclosure” (94, 95).

In chapter 13 of *Ulysses*, Joyce demonstrates that women with disabilities have also sexual desire. Joyce explains the popular conception in Bloom’s foremost reaction to the vision of Gerty’s limp: “Poor girl! That’s why she’s left on the shelf and the others did a sprint” (479). Even Joyce has previously denied Bloom’s presumption, that makes his empathy inappropriate to the moment. Gerty was determined in her rebuff when her friends shouted again and again to see the fireworks: “She had no intention of being at their beck and call. If they could run like rossies she could sit so she said she could see from where she was” (475). Here, the resolution to sit there was not an issue of being “left on the shelf” but of returning her friend’s call. Sitting was a matter of choice to Gerty and from that position she can carry on posing for Bloom. Again, Bloom is wrong in his belief that Gerty’s behaviour is affected by her condition. In his remark, “A defect is ten times worse in a woman. But makes them polite” (479), Bloom suggested that Gerty craves for love and endearment, and, thus, scared to offend.

But Gerty clarifies that she is “not a one to be lightly trifled with” (472), and, after receiving Bloom’s engrossment, she is willing to withstand Reggy: “if even after he dared to presume, she could give him one look of measured scorn that would make him shrivel up on the spot” (472). Here Joyce exemplifies his society’s unfairness against disabled woman only to refuse them.

Bloom’s response to the glimpse of Gerty’s disability refers an alteration of power (power relations between the two). Until now, Gerty and Bloom have performed a script which formed the idea of the male gaze, which suggests a sexualised way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. Garland – Thomson differentiates the gaze from simple looking and says that it is “an intense visual exchange that makes meaning” (“Staring” 9), and also records that the male gaze “often achieves the prolong intensity of



staring,” that can act as a display of power (“Staring” 41). Later the scene is disrupted by the disclosure of Gerty’s limp. As societies “have hidden away disabled person in asylums, secreted schools, hospitals and nursing homes”, Gerty has also secreted her disability; thus, Garland – Thomson points out, “when we do see the usually concealed sight of disability writ boldly on others, we stare in fascinated disbelief and uneasy identification ... such confusing sites both affirm our shared humanity and challenge complacent understandings” (“Staring” 19-20). Due to this, Bloom should regulate his perception of Gerty as the canonized entity of his scopophilic pleasure. As Bloom goes on to look at her, he speedily presumes the lower position of the object under inspection: “saw something in me. Wonder what ... Ought to attend to my appearance ... Still, you never know. Pretty girls and ugly men marrying. Beauty and the beast” (Joyce 481). This elicitation upraises Gerty’s position and belittles Bloom’s status, consequently harmonizing between Gerty and Bloom and the event ends with an expectation that they will meet again.

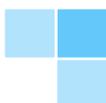
In this episode, the meeting between Gerty and Bloom transfers the significance from sexual intercourse to pleasure of both. Even it indicates that their reciprocal actions would not have been delightful, or ever desirable, under any other situation. In reality, the sentimental and sexual pleasure that both Gerty and Bloom undergo could only be possible in the realm of imagination as Gerty is hoping for a husband and Bloom is married already.

Many critics have seen Gerty’s disability as an augmentation of her disempowerment. For example, Fritz Senn identifies Gerty as “passively reactive” and in addition “lame and incomplete” (283). He again puts forward that the “awkwardness of the prose suggests the awkwardness of her limp” (291). It is stated that “Gerty’s sentimental and romantic notions are an iconic comment on the bleak life she lives and her actual inadequacy, her moral and physical lameness” (French 168). But in current elucidations, by critics like Katherin Mullin, Kimberly Devlin, Barbara Leckie, and Jen Shelton, Gerty has been acknowledged as more active and performative in the meeting (Bednarska 75).

It is traditionally accepted that people with disabilities are either asexual or undesirable sexual partners (75). But here Joyce, admitting his culture’s prejudices against disabled people, focuses on Gerty’s desirability and her agency. Gerty is recognised as a sexual subject by Bloom and this critiques the belief that Gerty is unsuitable for marriage because of her impairment. Though Bloom is awkward and hesitant at the beginning about Gerty’s disability, but at the end it does not reduce his attraction. Gerty always acts as an image deliberately in control and determining to exhibit herself:

and she let him and she saw that he saw and then it went so high it went out of sight a moment and she was trembling in every limb from being bent so far back that he had a full view high up above her knee where no-one ever not even on the swing or wading and she wasn't ashamed and he wasn't either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn't resist. (Joyce 477)

Gerty has experienced erotic pleasure from the meeting, although, as Bishop states, she does so less self-consciously than Bloom (194-95). “White hot passion was in that face, passion silent as the grave, and it had made her his... His hands and face were working and a tremor went over” (Joyce 475). These descriptions immediately refute the judgement of some reviewers who comprehend Gerty as a completely sexual object, disempowered. For



example, Henke proposes that Gerty's quietness during the meeting is an example of her entrapment in a masculine narrative ("Gerty MacDowell" 91-92).

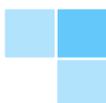
When Gerty poses for Bloom, she overtly embraces the postures of pinup girls and refers to the postures that are found in adult movies. These exercises allow Gerty to be an object of sexual desire. This does not indicate that the subject lacks choice and empowerment. Recognising the process in which feminine desirability has been formulated, Gerty enters in that discourse resolutely and challenges her culture's viewpoint that she is unacceptable or undesirable or less-desirable because of her disability. Generally disabled people are recognised as the subject of medical gaze, not of sexual gaze.

More, the chapter "Nausicaa" discloses that ability is also performative like gender. Gerty hides her limp and tries to look like a non-disabled person that signifies ability is also performative (Bednarska 79). Gerty again reformulates her subjectivity and body against other female when Gerty differentiates herself from some cyclists. Considering her affair with Reggy Wylie, she asserts that she is "not like other flighty girls unfeminine he had known, those cyclists, showing off what they hadn't got" (Joyce 466). On the basis of physical dissimilarities, she marks herself different from other girls as a glamour of her femininity. In this observation, Gerty has the advantage because her inability of cycling linked with her impairment is also a part of what makes her more feminine and a more desirable choice for Bloom.

Identifying his society's biases against disabled people, Joyce portrays those "defect" not as an obstacle but as a flaw that every person bears. It discloses the view point of modern writers on the effects of disability on personal relationships. Though disability has appeared as a negative trait in *Ulysses*, the author depicted his disabled character as both sexually desirable and desiring which is a denial of the traditional consciousness that disabled people are either sexually deviant or asexual. Again, a re-evaluation of the importance of Gerty's impairment compels us to research the complicated process that dogmas of gender and ability are constructed by one another. Reanalysis of Gerty as a gendered disabled subject also challenges the preeminent belief about sexuality and how it operates. An extensive and complex assessment is needed to get the proper understanding of the relationship between gender, disability and desire.

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