

Critical Disability Studies and
Fiction on the Right-to-Life Issues:
Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn*,
Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, and
the *Million Dollar Baby* Franchise

*Jeff Koloze**

ABSTRACT: After supplying examples of jargon-laden academic discussion of critical disability studies, this paper summarizes major ideas that constitute this literary theory. Two life-affirming fictional works that concern abortion and infanticide (Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*) are then briefly examined, using key ideas from the theory. A significant portion of the paper is devoted to applying critical disability studies to a euthanasia work (the *Million Dollar Baby* franchise, consisting of the short story and its film equivalent). The discussions of these three works are amplified by providing further commentary from a pro-life perspective. Finally, the paper determines how the principles of critical disability studies comport with the five elements of right-to-life literary theory and demonstrates how critical disability studies is compatible with the aims of the pro-life movement, which counters the dehumanization of the disabled in anti-life fiction.

* *Jeff Koloze* has taught academic skills courses for undergraduate and graduate students as well as courses in English, Communications, and Humanities since 1989 at various colleges and universities, including the University of Phoenix, South University, Catholic Distance University, Lakeland Community College, Lorain County Community College, and Walsh University. Dr. Koloze's primary research interest is the presentation of the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia in literature; most of his publications are available in conference proceedings and on the web. He has presented over fifty papers before academic and professional organizations on these topics. He is the author of *An Ethical Analysis of the Portrayal of Abortion in American Fiction: Dreiser, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Brautigan, and Irving* (2005) and *Testament to a Niagara Obsession* (2014). Dr. Koloze is president and founder of Koloze Consultants, whose objective is to assist faculty and students "to conduct research on the life issues for presentation and publication."

CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES is the newest literary theory that students of literature can use in their analysis and appreciation of literature. Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, a trusted and popular resource used by faculty and students, dates the theory from the 1990s, so scholarly attention to its tenets is relatively still in formation. Several scholars, however, have attributed the growth of the theory to political activism on behalf of those who are disabled or who otherwise have access issues that prevent them from full participation in society, much like political action after the Stonewall Riots in 1969 stimulated academic discussion of gay and lesbian themes in literature. For many critical disabilities scholars, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 was the beginning of concerted efforts to further the opportunity of looking at literature from the disabilities perspective.

Methodology and Structure of the Paper

The methodology for this study is relatively simple. After several paragraphs of significant summary, the Purdue site recommends seventeen titles for further reading: Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963)¹ and his *Madness and Civilization* (1964)²; Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995)³; Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996)⁴; David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000)⁵; Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2005)⁶; Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007)⁷; Michael Davidson's *Concerto for*

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, translated by A. M. Sheridan (New York NY: Routledge Classics, 2003).

² Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by Richard Howard (New York NY: Routledge Classics, 1989).

³ Lennard J. David, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London UK: Verso, 1995).

⁴ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997).

⁵ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁶ Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁷ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007).

the Left Hand (2008)⁸; Tobin Siebers's *Disability Theory* (2008)⁹; Fiona Kumari Campbell's *Contours of Ableism* (2009)¹⁰; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look* (2009)¹¹; Tobin Siebers's *Disability Aesthetics* (2010)¹²; Tanya Titchkosky's *The Question of Access* (2011)¹³; Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013)¹⁴; Kim Nielsen's *A Disability History of the United States* (2013)¹⁵; Rebecca Sanchez's *Deafening Modernism* (2015)¹⁶; and Maren Tova Linett's *Bodies of Modernism* (2017).¹⁷ All of these monographs have been read, the essential elements of the literary theory have been identified, and it is my task to discuss how the ideas relate with the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

Although surprising, since one would think that disability critics would be vocal in their criticism of politicians who support the killing of the handicapped person (whether he or she is unborn or born), searches on academic databases for critical disability studies on the three right-to-life issues yielded dismally few results. While I am certain that much more research exists on the intersection of critical disabilities studies and the three right-to-life issues than

⁸ Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2008).

⁹ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009). Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson are the same person. However, since the title page of *Staring* hyphenates her name while *Extraordinary* does not, I will use the hyphenated surname throughout when quoting from that monograph, following MLA format.

¹² Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹³ Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto ON: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Rebecca Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* (New York NY: New York Univ. Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Maren Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2017).

what I located, queries conducted within Academic Search Complete (a database recommended for college students as their first choice for beginning research) support this claim. Entering only the phrase “critical disabilities studies” (which automatically populates as a possible search phrase) and “abortion”, “infanticide”, and “euthanasia” in three unique searches (specifying that only scholarly, peer-reviewed articles would be found) yielded two results.

While the infanticide search found no scholarly articles, the abortion search yielded one article. Michelle Jarman’s highly connotative language in the abstract, provided by her to the database service, makes it clear that she does not support the first civil right to life:

The article challenges the politically reductive ways that disability is leveraged by both antiabortionists and pro-choice supporters -- on one side to claim “protection” of all life, and on the other to use disability as a crucial justification for abortion rights. It centers disability for two reasons: first, to demonstrate the deep connections of disability to the ongoing political erosion of access to reproductive healthcare services, which disproportionately impacts women of color and economically vulnerable women; and second, to build on recent scholarship suggesting a merging of critical disability and reproductive justice approaches to reconfigure the dominant pro-choice public discourse on abortion. To bring these two approaches closer together, this article focuses on two key elements of the abortion debate – access and autonomy – from a critical disability studies lens. By foregrounding disability approaches to access and critiques of autonomy, the complicated relational concerns of reproduction are brought into focus. Ultimately, it argues that an interconnected relational context provides a more nuanced approach that both supports women’s access to reproductive options and demands an expansion of the political frame based on choice and rights to include valuing and sustaining lives, challenging precarity, and supporting complex reproductive decisions.¹⁸

The sole euthanasia article obtained in the search vaguely concerns critical disabilities studies. Nicola Gavioli’s purpose is direct and much less biased against the pro-life perspective than Jarman’s:

This article focuses on the way in which contemporary Brazilian literature participates in the international debate regarding bioethical issues, with a particular focus on the representation and discussion of euthanasia and assisted suicide. Analyzing novels [and] in dialogue with scholars in Critical Disability Studies, I demonstrate how Brazilian literature today is engaged in such problematic discussions as: patients’

¹⁸ Michelle Jarman, “Relations of Abortion: Crip Approaches to Reproductive Justice,” *Feminist Formations* 27/1 (2015): 46.

rights, disability, and “good death,” presenting unusual points of view...and offering nuanced approaches that do not necessarily fit into binary simplifications for or against euthanasia.¹⁹

Fortunately for the pro-life researcher, the paucity of scholarly attention to the intersection of critical disabilities studies and the life issues indicates the opportunity that awaits younger scholars emerging in the otherwise leftist-controlled humanities and social sciences fields.

Monographic scholarship is careful not to endorse a pro-life perspective. One can attribute such hesitancy to the general leftist perspective of most academics, who may either be intolerant or simply ignorant of what they perceive as a “conservative” position of support for disabled or handicapped persons. For example, Lennard J. Davis is concerned about leftist support for abortion when he writes:

While the race-class-gender grouping tends to coalesce around what might be termed “progressive issues,” the disableist position may require realignments and rethinkings of some ideological “truths.”

For example, and very tellingly, the position of people with disabilities on the issue of abortion and fetal screening is not seamlessly in accord with a liberal/progressive agenda.²⁰

Despite this admonition, most critical disabilities scholars are firm in their use of the “race-class-gender” axis. For example, Kim E. Nielsen’s decidedly feminist-oriented history of disability suggests that disability rights should be pursued in the same way that “scholars have examined the historical expansion of democracy” through “race, class, and gender.”²¹ Similarly, Tanya Titchkosky mentions the race-class-gender axis several times and in various formations, whether as “race, class, and gender,” “race, class, gender, and sexuality,” or “race studies, queer studies, and various feminisms.”²²

After surveying the constituent elements of the literary theory, the final step in the research involved locating major works that concern characters who

¹⁹ Nicola Gavioli, “Bioethical Issues in Contemporary Brazilian Culture: Euthanasia and Literature,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 54/2 (2017): 129-30. Internal references to various novels omitted.

²⁰ Davis, p. 162.

²¹ Nielsen, p. xiii.

²² Titchkosky, pp. xii, 3, and 6.

are affected by disability or access issues. Fortunately, pro-life literary scholars have considered not only many major literary works but also emergent works that are popular but may not yet be in the category of canonical. Since more research will add to the pro-life analyses of these scholars, the online volumes of University Faculty for Life's annual conference proceedings will assist future researchers who wish to expand or update the work already done.

Following the above methodology, this paper first examines the academic jargon that intrudes on scholarly analysis using disability theory. I label this jargon the psychobabble that occurs in much literary criticism: the use of polysyllabic, abstract terms that signify not only the standard vocabulary used in any of the dominant literary theories available for students of literature (for example, feminist, Marxist, or queer theories) but also the political, usually leftist, intent of the academic who wrote them.

The second major section of this paper discusses political and religious bias evident in critical disability studies. Once these linguistic impediments and biases are eliminated, the paper isolates five major ideas that constitute critical disability studies. This study then advances to the application of critical disability studies to two areas of literature: first, a general discussion of how critical disability studies can be applied to several literary works that have heretofore not been analyzed through that literary theory, at least from a right-to-life perspective; second, to a more detailed examination of a significant euthanasia work, the short story "Million \$\$\$ Baby" by F. X. Toole and its film adaptation, *Million Dollar Baby*, notable for having been acted by three Hollywood greats: Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, and Hilary Swank. The final section of the paper demonstrates how right-to-life literary criticism enhances critical disability studies.²³

1. Academic Jargon or Psychobabble?

If they dislike writing research papers, it is no wonder that students either hate or despise literature assignments that demand that they do not merely read and enjoy great works of literature but require them to read those works from the perspectives of one of several literary theories that present arcane vocabulary, tortured expressions, and unrealistic if not ridiculous conclusions

²³ I offer many thanks to colleagues who ended the presentation of this paper at Mundelein Seminary/University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois with a vibrant question-and-answer period.

or interpretations. The terms and phrases *death of the author*, any formation of *gender* (such as *gender fluidity*), *oppression*, any formation of *patriarchy* (such as *heteropatriarchy* and *patriarchy* itself), *white privilege*, and other often-used terms and phrases from contemporary literary theory do not so much stimulate students to social action (note how many of them pertain to contemporary leftist political agitation) as they reduce them to the trite tears of boredom, probably because the terms themselves have now become so trite as to be devoid of meaning or laughable.

While psychobabble can be found in any work that uses one of the major literary theories in the effort to explicate, overthrow, or distort a literary work, the following are some of the more obvious examples of psychobabble from the monographs recommended by Purdue's Online Writing Lab for further study of critical disabilities theory.

Usually, the psychobabble occurs when critics use terms from the feminist literary lexicon to make critical disability studies claims about a literary work.²⁴ For example, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder use a barrage of standard feminist terms when discussing Montaigne's essay "Des Boiteux":

While the eroticization of a physical difference is by no means undermined by the narrator's equation of physical incapacity with heightened sexual potency, the challenge to an absolute devaluation of aberrant physicality requires the strategy of a radical inversion of cultural precepts.

In part, the narrator's sexualization of the *boiteuse* rhetorically appeals to patriarchal desires for feminine objectification. The addition of physical difference to an economy of masculine erotics complicates the issue of desire (and desirability) by disrupting the visual field of the patriarchal gaze itself.²⁵

Sometimes the psychobabble suggests a criticism of feminist theory, a bold move since feminist criticism is the foundation on which many critical disabilities scholars attribute the birth of their own perspective in literature.

²⁴ Disability studies' reliance on feminist principles is pronounced throughout the scholarship. For example, in his foreword to Fiona Kumari Campbell's work, Dan Goodley writes: "Through increased alliances with feminist, queer and post-colonial comrades, disability studies is continuing with its emancipation of disabled people at the same time as destabilising the dominant social order." Dan Goodley, "Foreword" in Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. ix.

²⁵ Mitchell and Snyder, p. 75.

This is the case when Michael Davidson writes that

disability also complicates feminist film theory's treatment of filmic gaze predicated on an able-bodied male viewer whose castration anxiety is finessed by the director's specular control over the female protagonist. Laura Mulvey's influential essay avoids the alliance between the objectified woman and a disabled male, the latter of whose loss of limb or eyesight is a necessary adjunct to masculine specular pleasure.²⁶

Davidson's concern (obsession?) with castration anxiety continues in other psychobabble passages where he asserts:

Finding the historical specifics of compulsory able-bodiedness is an important task for disabilities and queer studies, but such scholarship is often limited by residual medical and psychoanalytic models that generalize the connection of bodies and sexualities around narratives of loss and lack.... Because [feminist psychoanalytic film theory] has been important for understanding how cinema structures acts of looking through gendered spectacles, it has disabled the disability narrative of many films by treating acts of looking and gazing as defined by castration.²⁷

Of course, feminist criticism is not the only literary theory whose vocabulary scholars use to hang their ideas about disability criticism. Ato Quayson's postcolonial research argues that

Attitudes to disabilities in the West also evolved in response to interactions with other races. The colonial encounter and the series of migrations that it triggered in its wake served to displace the discourse of disability onto a discourse of otherness that was correlated to racial difference.... Disease provided a particularly supple set of metaphors to modulate some of the social anxieties that emerged in the colonial period around interracial encounters, both in Europe and in the United States, with the discourse on leprosy in the period being particularly productive.²⁸

The above passage is not as cumbersome as the following, which, seeming to abandon the vocabulary of any other theory, aims to discuss canonical authors, such as Samuel Beckett, from a disabilities studies perspective:

The primary effect of evacuating the facticity of disability is that its significance then serves to permeate the entire representational nexus while being simultaneously

²⁶ Davidson, pp. 4-5.

²⁷ Davidson, p. 64.

²⁸ Quayson, pp. 10-11.

absented from that nexus as a precise site for interpretation. Yet to read Beckett through a framework of disability is to have to forcibly intervene in the signifying chain that allows disability to be so easily assimilated to philosophical categories. Indeed, this would be the central task of a criticism informed by a consciousness of disability studies and its place in the critique of the overall scheme of aesthetic representation.²⁹

Non-canonical authors fare no better, although the following may be a victim of tortured literary criticism more than evidence of psychobabble from a critical disabilities perspective:

[The American Sign Language poem] “Poetry” presents a seemingly paradoxical embodied impersonality that suggests how we might rethink the relationship between texts and bodies in such a way so as to remain responsible to diverse lived experiences while still opening up to post-modern fluidity and eschewing a version of personality (or impersonality) that would align it with absolute authorial control.³⁰

Sometimes the scholarly psychobabble occurs when academics attempt either to justify their monographs or to define key terms in disabilities studies. This category of scholarly psychobabble occurs when Rosemarie Garland Thomson introduces her research thus:

My purpose here is to alter the terms and expand our understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing “disability” as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. In other words, I intend to introduce such figures as the cripple, the invalid, and the freak into the critical conversations we devote to deconstructing figures like the mulatto, the primitive, the queer, and the lady. To denaturalize the cultural encoding of these extraordinary bodies, I go beyond assailing stereotypes to interrogate the conventions of representation and unravel the complexities of identity production within social narratives of bodily differences.... Therefore, I focus here on how disability operates in culture and on how the discourses of disability, race, gender, and sexuality intermingle to create figures of otherness from the raw materials of bodily variation, specifically at sites of representation such as the freak show, sentimental fiction, and black women’s liberatory novels.³¹

Thomson’s verbal dexterity is not only able to collapse thousands of years of human history into one sentence (“In the tradition of Aristotle’s view of women

²⁹ Quayson, p. 85.

³⁰ Sanchez, p. 48

³¹ Thomson, *Extraordinary*, pp. 5-6.

as mutilated males, female genitalia – for the Western culture that later produced Freud – were the stigmata marking the putative absence that defined female lack”), but also to reduce her challenge of the grotesque in disabilities studies to a sentence that contains key terms from the lexicons of other theories: “Aestheticizing disability as the grotesque tends to preclude analysis of how those representations support or challenge the sociopolitical relations that make disability a form of cultural otherness.”³²

This reduction of the ideas from many other literary theories into an effort to explain disability theory as concisely as possible obtains when David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder discuss *prosthesis*, an essential term in their *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*:

Narrative Prosthesis is first and foremost about the ways in which the ruse of prosthesis fails in its primary objective: to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence. The works under scrutiny here tend to leave the wound of disability undressed so to speak. Its presence is enunciated as transgressive in that literary works often leave the disabled body as a troubled and troubling position within culture.^{33,34}

While it may not have been his intention to critique her, Tobin Siebers thought that it was necessary to clarify a prominent feminist thinker’s definition of the *body* (a key term and concept, one would think, for any critic concerned with disability studies) with the following:

Donna Haraway, although eschewing the language of realism, makes a case for the active biological agency of bodies, calling them “material-semiotic generative nodes.” By this last phrase, she means to describe the body as both constructed and generative of constructions and to dispute the idea that it is merely a ghostly fantasy produced by the power of language.³⁵

Two final examples can illustrate the linguistic heights that critical

³² Thomson, *Extraordinary*, pp. 72, 112.

³³ Mitchell and Snyder, p. 8.

³⁴ Students would find Fiona Kumari Campbell’s effort at definition a bit more complex: “In contrast with biomedicalism, contemporary disability studies scholarship argues that the neologism disability is a relational signifier emerging out of interactivity between impairment and modes of socio-economic organisation framed by epistemologies of corporeal perfection” (p. 131).

³⁵ Siebers, *Disability Theory*, p. 203; internal citation omitted.

disabilities scholars sometimes reach. A passage in Lennard J. Davis's analysis of deafness rises almost to grand philosophizing, replete with a great number of literary critical buzzwords that every academic should use at least once in his or her life:

For the writer, garrulousness and silence both empty meaning from language. Meaning is the surplus value of the text's production. Or, in another modality, meaning is the symptom of the neurosis of totality. Loquaciousness and silence reveal the symptomatic nature of meaning, and therefore are constant reminders of the deconstructive threat hovering around the text. Loquaciousness, too, in an overdetermined way, also represents the transgressive sublimation of female power. If women could legitimately give voice to their complaints, they would not need the subaltern tactics of unruly domestic linguistic infringement.³⁶

To their (dis?)credit, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell collapse many literary critical buzzwords in one sentence when they argue that "Williams's 'anatomy of film bodies' [diagram] refuses simplistic demands of body genre films as crass or merely ideologically duplicitous, while using their fantasy structures as a means to expose ideologically invested formulas."³⁷

2. Political and Religious Bias

Another noticeable aspect of academic discussion of critical disability theory is its political and religious bias, especially against Judeo-Christian values that shaped the Western world. Academic biases against political conservatives in the United States may account for many politically leftist statements throughout the seventeen volumes suggested by the Purdue site. For example, using terms with highly negative connotations to disparage a union between disability activists and pro-life conservatives, Michael Davidson writes:

The current administration of President George W. Bush is orchestrating its own biotech nightmare scenario around stem-cell research and abortion.... Given this conflation of geopolitical and biopolitical discourses, it is little wonder that disability advocates, who have forcefully argued against physician-assisted suicide and genetic engineering, have found themselves in an unholy alliance with the religious Right.³⁸

³⁶ Davis, p. 116.

³⁷ Snyder and Mitchell, p. 161.

³⁸ Davidson, p. 221.

The political bias is not as pronounced as the religious bias in the scholarship, yet the number of instances is sufficiently large to deserve comment. Of course, many critical disability scholars accept the intellectual premise that the modern world is irreligious; for example, Quayson asserts: “Even though in the modern world the notion of the proximity of the divine and metaphysical orders to the human lifeworld is no longer predominant, such beliefs have still flared up from time to time.”³⁹

Often, the bias against religious entities is subtle, as when Fiona Kumari Campbell suggests that the Roman Catholic Church had nothing in common with Islam in fighting the promotion of abortion at the United Nations: “Interest convergence has sometimes resulted in unlikely bedfellows (i.e., groups in the community forming alliances where normally their interests might be different or even conflicting),”⁴⁰ or her undisputed reference to a claim “that for people of European Christian decent [sic], internalised racism can empower, if not privilege, feelings of superiority.”⁴¹

The person or, more correctly, the body, of Jesus Christ poses a particular problem for some critical disability scholars. Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes:

The prodigy plot informs many of the foundational narratives of Western culture.... Prodigious births came in the form of unusual bodies that could be distinguished from run-of-the-mill births so as to provide a discernable text. While Jesus is not represented as monstrous per se, his body at both birth and death functions as a prodigy: its distinction offers it up as a preternatural gesture to be read. Like monsters, Jesus was imagined as a sign from the gods.^{42,43}

Despite these instances, the bias against religious contributions to human life is most obvious in its absence. Foucault’s two monographs discuss religion in general and the Catholic Church specifically. See, for example, his

³⁹ Quayson, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Campbell, p. 18

⁴¹ Campbell, p. 21.

⁴² Thomson, *Staring*, p. 210.

⁴³ Thomson’s distance from Christianity is again evident when she writes about how “Augustine delights in curious and inexplicable bodies as signs of his Christian god’s benevolent purpose and constant intervention in the universe” (*Extraordinary*, p. 56).

discussion of the Church's role in creating leprosaria throughout medieval Europe in his *Madness and Civilization*⁴⁴ or the idea expressed in *The Birth of the Clinic* that doctors after the French Revolution became "priests of the body."⁴⁵ However, the contributions of religious entities regarding the sanctity of human life are rarely noted. Why critical disabilities scholars do not explicitly recognize this vitally important factor of human life is a complex subject that must be relegated to future research.

3. Key Ideas of Critical Disability Studies

What remains from the rubble of academic critical disabilities psycho-babble and the bias against religious ideas and conservatives? Once the debris has been cleared, at least five key ideas remain that can be useful to help students appreciate literature. The catalog that follows is not progressive, in the sense of tracing how one idea causes another, but cumulative; one idea does not ineluctably cause another. The order of these ideas is my own summary of their occurrence across the works identified on the Purdue site and moves from general philosophical ideas to more specific and usually political matters of concern to the theorists.

The paramount idea remaining is that critical disabilities theory considers disability not as a medical diagnosis but as a social construct. That is, while one's perception of a disability may have a diagnostic foundation, it is unwarranted to conclude that the disability itself is or should be solely controlled by the decisions of the medical community. Much more important is how people react to the diagnosis of a disability either to themselves or to another person and how life is affected by those perceptions. Thus, the theory adopts feminist literary criticism's notion that gender is a social construct more than a physical reality. Critical disability scholars' reliance on this feminist principle poses some problems that will be discussed below.

Second, critical disability studies posits that the ideology of humanness had been corrupted not earlier than the Enlightenment and certainly no later than the industrialization and attendant quantification of human work in the nineteenth century. According to critical disability studies scholars, the nineteenth century especially saw the transformation of humanity from being celebrated for its diversity to one that was standardized, quantified, and

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Madness*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *Birth*, p. 37.

controlled by medical authority so that any deviation from the norm of what a human being should be capable of doing became a disability.

Third, critical disabilities theory challenges the perspective that one who has an access issue or disability is not less-than human but fully human with a body structure different from the norm of a human being with one head, two arms, two legs, and all five senses in functioning order. While this tenet contradicts the ancient understanding of human nature and the perfection of the able-bodied (Aristotle has few friends in the critical disabilities theory community), one can quickly finish the possible syllogism resulting from these propositions: that critical disabilities theory is much more pro-life than, for example, standard anti-life feminist literary criticism or deconstruction, both of which seek to destabilize common notions of humanity that have obtained in the Western world since the rise of Judeo-Christianity.

Fourth, several critical disability theory scholars have noted that disability is a universal phenomenon and part of human nature. That is, disability does not apply only to those who are handicapped or who have access issues or other impediments that prohibit them from full participation in able-bodied society. Critical disabilities scholars contend that all of humanity is disabled if only because at some point in every life one requires some technological device to meet the criteria of an able-bodied person: from medicines (which can vary from the sporadic use of ibuprofen for caffeine-withdrawal headaches to life-saving insulin) to prosthetics (which can vary from the most complex of prosthetic devices, such as flesh-colored and computerized appendages for quadriplegics, to the simplest, such as glasses). There is a danger in asserting this proposition. If everyone becomes disabled, then one can argue that no special concern for the disabled should be tolerated, let alone mandated by law. Here critical disability scholars are caught in a philosophical jam: either they are justified in bringing attention to the lives of those who are disabled or they are not since all the uniqueness of the disabled body has evaporated in the universal claim of sameness.

Finally, critical disability theory confronts persons (for example, Peter Singer⁴⁶), cultural artifacts (the film *The Best Years of Our Lives*⁴⁷), and

⁴⁶ Tobin Siebers is one of many critical disabilities scholars who identify Peter Singer's anti-life positions. He argues: "Surprisingly, little thought and energy have been given to disputing the belief that nonquality human beings do exist. This belief is so robust that it supports the most serious and characteristic injustices of our day

institutions (such as the Jerry Lewis telethons⁴⁸) that the critics say either distort the existence or jeopardize the right to exist of those who are categorized as disabled.⁴⁹ Although they are advocating pro-life positions when

[including] euthanasia [and] assisted suicide,” *Disability Aesthetics*, pp. 23-24. Siebers’s intense opposition to Peter Singer is evident when he writes about the schizophrenic nature of some contemporary leftist political positions that the philosopher espouses: “Peter Singer concludes that we should outlaw animal cruelty and stop eating meat but that we should perform euthanasia on people with mental disabilities or difficult physical disabilities such as spina bifida.... This horrifying conclusion shows the limitations of eighteenth-century rationalism” (*Disability Theory* p. 92).

See also Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, who oppose Singer’s “argument that some disabled children should be passively euthanized because they lack the sentience that his brand of utilitarianism accords to fully ‘human’ organisms” thus: “Such arguments characterized nearly all eugenic sentiments; they hinge upon scientific and philosophical willingness to empty certain individuals of qualities and thus reduce them to a state of mere matter” (p. 214; internal quotes in original).

⁴⁷ The 1946 Oscar-winning film *The Best Years of Our Lives* is singled out by critical disabilities scholars for particular criticism. Although previous generations may have viewed the film as an optimistic post-war film whose serious theme of the integration of soldiers into American society is balanced by the sentimentality of a romance between a typical girl-next-door and a returning seaman who lost both hands in the war, most criticism of the film by disabilities scholars seeks to dampen the positive emotions the film creates with a cold dose of emotionless psychobabble. For example, Davidson reduces the range of emotions in the film to an “attempt to normalize the prostheticized body [as] represented in *The Best Years of Our Lives* and other films about the difficulties of disabled soldiers attempting to reenter social and private life. Such normalization through prosthetics and film have implications for heteronormalcy, but the dark doppelgänger of this restorative trend – what I am calling the phantom limb of cold war normalcy – is played out in film noir” (pp. 78-79).

⁴⁸ While some critical disability theorists are softer in their critique of Jerry Lewis (for example, Rosemarie Garland Thomson merely states that “Jerry Lewis’s Telethons testify not only to the cultural demand for body normalization, but to our intolerance of the disabled figure’s reminder that perfection is a chimera” (*Extraordinary*, p. 46), others are brutal in their criticism, to whom no benefit of the doubt is granted that Lewis may have accomplished some good work. For example, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell state: “We recognize the ‘bumbling fool’ of comedy (as in the screwball plots of the 1960s that featured later disability telethon sycophant Jerry Lewis)” (*Cultural*, p. 162).

⁴⁹ Michael Davidson’s generic critique of telethons could apply to Jerry Lewis or Danny Thomas, founder of the St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, since he uses the third-person masculine pronoun, but his claim, which sounds more jealous than

they support the right to life of disabled individuals, critical disability scholars are hesitant to equate their support of the right to exist with the right to life.

4. Applying Critical Disability Studies to Various Literary Works

Now that some general principles of critical disability theory have been identified, it is possible to illustrate how the theory can help to offer a reading of specific literary works different from one that seeks patriarchal oppression of women by men (the tired axiom of feminist theory), or the conflict of ideologies, especially economic ones (as in the divisive class-warfare language of Marxist literary criticism), or the distortion of heterosexual normativity (as in gay and lesbian criticism's assertion of the validity of alternative "sexualities"). Since this paper is designed for a conference of researchers who are concerned with the three life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, I have selected novels that address each of the three issues and will discuss how the major ideas from critical disability studies could enhance a standard reading. Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn*⁵⁰ (1987) challenges readers to think about abortion and the life of the unborn, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*⁵¹ (1993) includes infanticide in its plot, and F.X. Toole's short story "Million \$\$\$ Baby" (2000)⁵² concerns euthanasia. The first two works will be briefly examined, while Toole's forty-page short story and its two-hour-and- twelve-minute film adaptation will be discussed at greater length.

scholarly, could apply to Shriner's Hospitals for Children, whose television commercials saturate the airwaves: "The celebrity telethon host who patronizes his poster child guest disables with one hand while soliciting funds for that child's rehabilitation with the other" (p. 176).

⁵⁰ Carlos Fuentes, *Christopher Unborn*, translated by Alfred MacAdam and the author (New York NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989).

⁵¹ Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (New York NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

⁵² F.X. Toole, "Million \$\$\$ Baby," *Rope Burns: Stories from the Corner* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 61-101); F. X. Toole, "Million Dollar Baby," *Million Dollar Baby: Stories from the Corner* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 61-101). For some reason, the 2005 reprint of Toole's short story used the word "Dollar" for the symbols; the film version also uses the word. Since Toole died in 2002, three years before the reprint and two years before the 2004 film, and may not have approved the substitution, I will use the symbols throughout when referring to the original style of the short story's title on first publication.

Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn* (1987)

Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn* (1987) is a first-person narration of an unborn child who recounts the various stages of his development. Literary theorists can view the novel as, from a feminist perspective, an exercise in patriarchal oppression; after all, Christopher is not only a male but a male unborn baby who qualifies as a "parasite" in the feminist lexicon, feeding off (which means depriving his mother of) essential nutrients for her life. The bulk of the scholarship attending Fuentes's novel comes from this feminist focus.

A critical disability theorist, however, could discover the obvious: Christopher is as immobile as any born human who uses a wheelchair. In fact, Christopher is more "crippled" than a wheelchair user, since the wheelchair user can move from his or her appliance to another location while it is impossible for the unborn child to experience anything but his mother's womb. Thus, Christopher is in an extreme subordinate (literary critics would use the standard term "subject") position that critical disability theorists would find most objectionable since no one, whether disabled or able-bodied, should be so subordinate or subject to another human being.

Moreover, a critical disabilities theorist would recognize what pro-lifers have long argued since the beginning decades of the movement: the science of fetal development signifies one's humanity. Thus, whether Christopher consists of a clump of cells, a body with nascent arms and legs (similar to a born child or adult with phocomelia from having been a Thalidomide baby), or a fetus about to be born (one who is utterly incapable of surviving outside the womb without direct intervention by his parents), critical disabilities theorists should assert Christopher's unqualified right to live as much as his mother's. Since one's condition of dependency does not negate one's right to life, he is a character whose birth would be welcomed in the fictional world of Fuentes's novel.

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993)

Ostensibly concerned with overpowering a dystopian world where not only human emotions but also memories are banned, perhaps the most enduring feature of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* are passages where handicapped newborns are killed. In fact, it is the infanticide scene that becomes the crucial scene of anagnorisis in the novel that matures the adolescent Jonas into a young man on a mission of liberation. That his father commits the infanticide of a defective child called a "newchild" in the eugenically-correct community is especially

horrifying for Jonas:

His father was talking, and Jonas realized that he was hearing the answer to the question he had started to ask. Still in the special voice, his father was saying, "I know, I know. It hurts, little guy. But I have to use a vein, and the veins in your arms are still too teeny-weeny."

He pushed the plunger very slowly, injecting the liquid into the scalp vein until the syringe was empty.

"All done. That wasn't so bad, was it?" Jonas heard his father say cheerfully. He turned aside and dropped the syringe into a waste receptacle.

Now he cleans him up and makes him comfy, Jonas said to himself, aware that The Giver didn't want to talk during the little ceremony.

As he continued to watch, the newchild, no longer crying, moved his arms and legs in a jerking motion. Then he went limp. He [sic] head fell to the side, his eyes half open. Then he was still....

He killed it! My father killed it! Jonas said to himself, stunned at what he was realizing. He continued to stare at the screen numbly.

His father tidied the room. Then he picked up a small carton that lay waiting on the floor, set it on the bed, and lifted the limp body into it. He placed the lid on tightly.

He picked up the carton and carried it to the other side of the room. He opened a small door in the wall; Jonas could see darkness behind the door. It seemed to be the same sort of chute into which trash was deposited at school.

His father loaded the carton containing the body into the chute and gave it a shove.

"Bye-bye, little guy," Jonas heard his father say before he left the room. Then the screen went blank.⁵³

A Marxist literary critic would find in this passage the necessary conflict between ideologies that is an essential feature of the theory. In this perspective, Jonas and his comrades are adolescent protagonists who oppose and overthrow the dominant ideology of their world to secure a more fulfilling and more human world for themselves.

A critical disabilities theorist, of course, would elaborate on this essential plot resolution and point out that the protagonists are advocates of human life deemed inferior and subject to being killed, what the authorities euphemistically call "release."⁵⁴ Moreover, while acknowledging that it depicts the disastrous effects of a totalitarian government on human life, a disabilities critic would emphasize that the novel concerns the rights of newborns who are

⁵³ Lowry, pp. 149-51; italics in original.

⁵⁴ Lowry, p. 2.

handicapped, elderly persons who are valued for being repositories of mankind's collective history, and the assertion that the state does not grant the right to life, but merely recognizes it.

All of these positions of the disabilities critic have long been held by the pro-life movement. The pro-life community has a written record addressing the threat of infanticide since the 1980s. Effie A. Quay wrote *And Now Infanticide* in 1980,⁵⁵ Joseph R. Stanton followed with his *Infanticide* in 1981,⁵⁶ Melinda Delahoyde expanded the pro-life perspective on infanticide in her 1984 monograph *Fighting for Life: Defending the Newborn's Right to Live*,⁵⁷ and pro-life research in this area has continued since then. Similarly, in the area of experience with totalitarian governments, Steven W. Mosher introduced the pro-life movement to the anti-life practices of the world's most totalitarian state, the People's Republic of China, in his seminal 1993 work, *A Mother's Ordeal: One Woman's Fight against China's One-Child Policy*,⁵⁸ and pro-life special-interest groups like Reggie Littlejohn's Women's Rights Without Frontiers continues promoting awareness that, as the masthead on its website announces, "Forced Abortion Is Not a Choice."⁵⁹

F.X. Toole's "Million \$\$\$ Baby" (short story 2000; film 2004)

F.X. Toole's short story "Million \$\$\$ Baby" illustrates the tenacity of Mary Margaret Fitzgerald, who wants Frankie Dunn not only to train her to be a boxer but also to manage her. She is insistent that she will have no one else work with her, and Maggie's devotion to her profession generates her success in the ring. The possibility of her being a boxer winning a million dollar prize, however, is negated by a disastrous punch from an opponent and a fall onto a metal surface that transform her from a gifted boxer to a quadriplegic. Thus immobilized, breathing on a ventilator, and having undergone one leg amputation, Maggie asks Frankie to kill her. Although refusing at first, he

⁵⁵ Effie A. Quay, *And Now Infanticide* (Chicago IL: Sun Life, 1980).

⁵⁶ Joseph R. Stanton, *Infanticide* (Washington, D.C.: Americans United for Life, 1981).

⁵⁷ Melinda Delahoyde, *Fighting for Life: Defending the Newborn's Right to Live* (Ann Arbor MI: Servant Books, 1984).

⁵⁸ Steven W. Mosher, *A Mother's Ordeal: One Woman's Fight Against China's One-Child Policy* (New York NY: Harcourt Brace, 1993).

⁵⁹ Women's Rights Without Frontiers, *Forced Abortion Is Not a Choice*, 2019, www.womensrightswithoutfrontiers.org/index.php.

agrees to kill her at short story's end. The film largely coincides with these essential details of the short story, although there are significant differences, discussed below.

While some may use the short story as an argument for the medical killing called euthanasia, a critical disabilities scholar would emphasize not merely the bodily integrity of Maggie in both her able-bodiedness and her quadriplegic state but also her humanity. Maggie remains the same person she was after the accident in the ring; the difference post-accident is that she uses specific prostheses and technological appliances to continue living.

Her essential humanity is something that other characters in the short story do not recognize because they are focused on her mere body. Frankie's litany of distortions about Maggie's body begins subtly in the story and film when he constantly asserts that he does not train "girls" for boxing. The narrator reinforces Frankie's perception of Maggie's gender; she is a "girl," even though she is thirty-two:

Two thick braids of deep auburn hair hung down behind each ear, framing a freckled face and a pair of agate eyes, like Frankie's daughter's. She was maybe five feet nine and weighed a fit 140. She was relaxed and stood gracefully, her weight balanced on both feet, and despite a broken nose, she was a looker.⁶⁰

Frankie's focus on Maggie's body continues when he eventually becomes her trainer:

"When you throw a right-hand, you got to step out to the left six inches as you move half a step in with both feet. That frees your right hip and leg and foot, like this, so you can *snap* your ass into your shots. I mean your backside."

"You got it the first time. Got one on me like a forty-dollar mule."

Do you ever, Frankie thought, and long legs with calves like a ballerina. Long arms and a short body, perfect for a fighter. Because of her sweatshirt and T-shirts, he couldn't be sure about her bustline, but she didn't seem to be top-heavy, which was good for a girl fighter.⁶¹

After the accident, Maggie is described more in medical terms that any disabilities critic would abhor and that pro-life scholars would classify as standard dehumanization, replacing the humanity of the patient with medical

⁶⁰ Toole, p. 64.

⁶¹ Toole, p. 70; italics in original.

terminology. “I’m a C-1 and C-2 complete,” Maggie tells Frankie, explaining that “that means my spinal cord’s so bad they never can fix me.”⁶² The narrator elaborates a substantial medical summary by asserting that

her neurologists determined that she was a permanent, vent-dependent quadriplegic unable to breathe without a respirator. As a C-1 and C-2, she was injured at the first and second cervical vertebrae, which meant she could talk and slightly move her head, but that was all. She had lost the ability to breathe on her own, to move her limbs. She could not control her bladder or her bowel movements. She’d be frozen the rest of her life.⁶³

Maggie’s dehumanization continues as the story races towards its denouement. She is transformed into a non-human entity: “Twice she spasmed into a grotesque caricature of herself.”⁶⁴ If her humanity is referenced, then it becomes metaphorically transformed into another non-human entity, ice: “Most of the patients were cheerful. Maggie was one of the ones who wasn’t, as each day the dread of a frozen life engulfed her.”⁶⁵ Maggie herself asserts her lack of humanness when she identifies with the term most commonly used by elderly persons who fear what they will become to their children, and the dehumanization is intensified being delivered in her hillbilly twang: “Bein a burden ain’t somethin I could handle.”⁶⁶ Besides being a burden, Maggie dehumanizes herself further by reducing her humanity to that of an animal. “‘Frankie’,” she said, now looking him straight in the eye. “‘I want you to put me down like Daddy did Axel [the family dog]’ The next day she asked him again. “‘You’d do it for a dog’.”⁶⁷

Once the dehumanization has been fully depicted, Maggie’s request to be killed seems ineluctable. At this point, so late in the narrative, it is odd that Frankie likes being in “St. Brendan’s [which] was an old church, one in which the smells of burning candles and incense were ever present. For Frankie it was a holy place, and he took solace from it, knowing that his torture was mirrored in the broken body of the crucified Christ.”⁶⁸ That he does not see the crucified

⁶² Toole, p. 85.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Toole, p. 87.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Toole, p. 88.

⁶⁷ Toole, pp. 92-93.

⁶⁸ Toole, p. 96.

Christ in the equally broken, immobilized, and therefore symbolically crucified body of Maggie makes Toole's short story all the more compelling as evidence of the blindness that some have towards those who are medically vulnerable.

Maggie's killing in the short story differs greatly from the film. In the movie, Frankie disconnects Maggie's breathing tube so that she can "fall asleep"; he then injects adrenaline into an intravenous tube. Thus, Maggie's death scene is shown as utterly peaceful and passive, gentle music composed by Clint Eastwood himself swirling around the final scenes. In the short story, however, Frankie plays a much more active role in killing her:

"I won't hurt you," he whispered in her ear. "First I'm going to put you to sleep. Then I'll give you a shot."

*Yes.*⁶⁹

Frankie stood behind her so he wouldn't have to see her face. He firmly pressed his thumbs to both sides of Maggie's neck, cutting off the blood flow to her brain at the carotid arteries. In a few seconds, Maggie's eyes closed and her mouth came open. Oxygen from the vent escaped and became part of the whirlwind inside Frankie's head. He stood pressing for three minutes, long enough to give himself the time he needed.

Frankie looked at her, had to choke back a howl.⁷⁰ But he still pried her mouth open the width of three fingers, and injected the contents of the hypodermic needle beneath the stub of Maggie's tongue. The adrenaline, all thirty millimeters of it, was enough to kill a dragon, but Frankie knew it would dissipate in Maggie's system shortly after being injected. Should there be an autopsy, the tiny spot where the needle had entered would not to [sic] be noticed. But even if it were, the adrenaline would never be detected....

He checked Maggie's pulse. It raced faster than a speed bag. Then the stroke hit her and her face contorted, one eye sagging open.⁷¹

Maggie's killing scene allows critical disability theorists to demonstrate how warped contemporary society has become regarding the rights of the disabled. A disabilities critic would emphasize Maggie's humanity, despite her condition of dependency. Such a critic would also emphasize the intrusion of

⁶⁹ In this exchange, because she cannot speak (she bit her tongue off in an effort to commit suicide by bleeding to death), Maggie blinks twice to signify her affirmation.

⁷⁰ The idea that killing a human being in any act of euthanasia dehumanizes the killer him- or herself can be supported by this bit of fictional evidence. Note that Frankie chokes back not a cry, something a human being would do, but a howl, which indicates that he has become not only less-than human and not only animalistic, but a ferocious animal, a wolf.

⁷¹ Toole, p. 100; 100; italics in original.

the medical sphere into her life; Maggie's equation of herself with the diagnosis that "I'm a C-1 and C-2 complete" is merely evidence of the degree to which a disabled person can internalize another person's opinion of his or her medical condition.

Moreover, the disabilities critic would highlight the irony that Frankie and his associate Eddie are just as socially handicapped or disabled as Maggie herself. Besides her medical condition resulting from the boxing injury, Maggie is handicapped in class status; in one passage the narrator simply reports that "She was born and raised in southwestern Missouri, in the hills outside the scratch-ass Ozark town of Theodosia.... She was trailer trash."⁷² Frankie is similarly socially handicapped; he does not connect with his apparently large family, even though the text refers to "his children" and "his sons and daughters and grandchildren" but no wife.⁷³ To reinforce the gruffness that probably accounts for his emotional distance from his family, Clint Eastwood, who plays his character, utters his lines with a grainy, smoker's voice. Frankie's associate Eddie is also handicapped, literally; he lost one of his eyes in a boxing match. With such handicaps or disabilities, it is no wonder that Frankie and Eddie do not perceive what it would take a formalist literary critic or a pro-lifer to perceive from Maggie's essential biographical detail: Maggie, the trailer trash woman, hails from "Theodosia," which means "gift of God."

5. Enhancing Critical Disability Studies with Right-to-Life Literary Criticism

As the commentary on Toole's short story suggests, critical disability studies can be an intensely life-affirming school of literary criticism without explicitly identifying itself as such. While critical disabilities scholars may be hesitant to identify themselves with the pro-life movement, we who support the first civil right should not be reticent in making the connections clear. Certainly, the goals of the disabilities rights and pro-life movements are almost identical. While legislative goals may differ, both the disability rights and pro-life movements work to advance respect for more vulnerable persons who may be targets of infanticide and euthanasia activists.⁷⁴ Therefore, we can complete

⁷² Toole, p. 68.

⁷³ Toole, pp. 63, 95.

⁷⁴ Some disabilities scholars are keenly aware of the convergence of the disability and pro-life movements. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder express their appreciation for "the latest generation of disability rights activists [including] the entire

the intellectual linkage between critical disability studies and the pro-life movement explicitly.

I have written elsewhere about five questions that right-to-life literary theory brings to the explication, analysis, and appreciation of literature concerning the life issues. As life-affirming as critical disabilities theory is, these questions cannot only enhance that theory, but fill in significant gaps so that students of literature receive a comprehensive perspective of the controversial literature they are reading.

Each of the questions of right-to-life literary theory addresses some aspect of literary works that critical disabilities theory considers briefly or ignores. For example, whether the literary work supports the perspective that human life is, in the philosophical sense, a good, some “thing” that is priceless, is obliquely affirmed. Granted, any disabilities critic must conclude that any life is a philosophical good, even one that happens to be less-able-bodied than another. However, scanning the scholarly literature, one is hard pressed to find an explicit acknowledgment of this universal human right as a philosophical good. Much more common is a recurring theme, expressed by Siebers and virtually all critical disability scholars, for example, that the specific human attributes of “race, class, gender, and sexuality” are important for securing human happiness, but not an explicit mention of the foundational right without which no discussion of these accidental characteristics could ensue, the right to life.⁷⁵

Fuentes’s and Lowry’s novels are not as ambiguous as they seem in determining whether human life itself is a good. Christopher’s struggle to be born is as life-affirming as Jonas’s struggle against the totalitarian state that encroaches on his life. These are affirmations of life that a reader must work out beyond the mere plot development of an unborn child moving like a

‘Princeton 7’ of *Not Dead Yet*” (*Narrative*, p. xv; internal quotes and italics in original), appreciation expressed as “We are forever grateful” in another of their works (*Cultural*, p. xiv). In contrast, while her attack on the group fails because her arguments are clear summaries of the case for activism from Feminists for Life with the disabilities movement, Alison Kafer categorizes members of Feminists for Life as “anti-reproductive rights activists” who are “moving steadily to present themselves as the better ally to disability movements” because “the FFL presents itself as more aligned with the interests of disability communities than the pro-choice movement is; according to this logic, advocates for abortion and other reproductive rights are too closely tied to eugenic practices and histories to support disabled people” (p. 163).

⁷⁵ Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 28.

handicapped entity through nine months of gestation or teens moving from a dystopian world into an unknown and freer site for human development.

Determining whether human life is a good in Toole's story is much more challenging. Most scenes occur not in glamorous venues where Maggie revels in her prowess but in a poverty-stricken gym where "the stink" permeates the environment and where the intellectual development of the boxers in training is trumped by the physical growth of muscles, movements, and boxing technique. That Frankie kills Maggie supports this dismal view of human life; if he thought that human life were indeed a philosophical good, then he would have acknowledged it, argued more forcefully against Maggie's comparison of herself to a dog, and, most obviously, not killed her.

The second question of right-to-life literary theory considers whether the literary work respects the individual as a being with inherent rights, the paramount one being the right to life. After all, any critical disabilities critic reviewing a work of literature must affirm the life of the person depicted in the work who may not be able-bodied as other characters. However, the reasons why such a character should have his or her life affirmed are not provided in any of the three works considered here, and the assertion for the right to exist remains on the surface level. This fundamental philosophical difference between disabilities and pro-life literary critics is profound, for pro-life critics usually base their support for a person's existence, whether fictional or real, usually on a religious basis or on a common understanding that certain rights are inherent in human beings, having come from the Creator.

The third question of right-to-life literary theory covers the actions of a family, specifically whether the literary work respects heterosexual normativity and the integrity of the family. In all three works discussed here, the families are broken or distorted, adjectives that would be used by any critical disabilities scholar to describe the less-than-perfect family situations in which the characters live. Fuentes's family consists of Christopher and his mother, and his father is spoken of as though he is always absent. Christopher, whose vocabulary in Fuentes's work is amazingly erudite, receives no whispers through the abdominal wall from a loving father as contemporary fathers sometimes do. Jonas has a traditional family, but his father is ideologically handicapped by his anti-life philosophy of killing defective newborns; thus, Jonas's father is automatically disqualified as a functional father, understood in the Jewish and Christian culture of the West as a man who performs the triple "provider, protector, and priest" duties for the family.

The fourth question of right-to-life literary theory investigates whether the literary work comports with the view that unborn, newborn, and mature human life has an inherent right to exist. Unfortunately, if critical disabilities studies counts a pro-abortion position, one of the major tenets of feminist literary criticism, as one of its own, then the philosophic problem that this tenet creates limits the universal applicability of the theory. Thus, if feminist literary theory has enshrined the belief that the mother has greater rights than the unborn child, and if disability criticism accepts this premise, then critical disability studies is schizophrenic. It cannot argue for the right to life of all handicapped or disabled persons since it supports the killing of the most vulnerable and (like Christopher in Fuentes's novel) most disabled person imaginable, the unborn child in his or her mother's womb. While many disability scholars ignore the right to life of the unborn as much as they are silent about Margaret Sanger's support for eugenicist abortion,⁷⁶ others understand the disturbing connection between eugenics, abortion,⁷⁷ and attacks on the disabled. For example, Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes: "Both the modern eugenics movement, which arose from the mid-nineteenth century scientific community, and its current counterpart, reproductive technology designed to predict and eliminate 'defective' fetuses, reveal a determination to eradicate disabled people."^{78,79}

Similarly, of course, if one accepts the proposition that the unborn child is, in true Nazi thinking, a life unworthy of life, then persons at the end of the

⁷⁶ Few critical disabilities scholars note Sanger's support for eugenics as the foundation on which the birth artificial birth control movement began. To her credit, Maren Tova Linett makes the connection clear: "Eugenics formed a strong component of the birth control movement, as Margaret Sanger in the United States and Marie Stopes in Britain sought to popularize birth control among 'undesirable' populations" (p. 12; internal quotes in original).

⁷⁷ It is striking, however, to read scholars who ignore the unborn completely when they should include them, as when Campbell writes, "From the moment a child is born, he/she emerges into a world where he/she receives messages that to be disabled is to be *less than*, a world where disability may be *tolerated* but in the *final instance*, is *inherently negative*" (p. 17; italics in original). Later in the work, however, Campbell calls abortion "eugenics by proxy" (p. 157).

⁷⁸ Thomson, *Extraordinary*, p. 34, internal quotes in original.

⁷⁹ To her credit, Thomson reiterates her opposition to the killing of disabled unborn children when she argues that "Indeed, one of our strongest cultural taboos forbids the extraordinary body, as the... abortion of 'defective' fetuses, and other normalization procedures attest" (*Extraordinary*, p. 79; internal quotes in original).

chronological spectrum could also become vulnerable targets of eugenic forces. Adopting the eugenic proposals of the Nazi regime would be especially schizophrenic since many critical disability scholars have demonstrated how the American and Nazi eugenics movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assaulted the rights of those persons for whom disabilities studies was first created – the medically vulnerable, the disabled, and the handicapped.⁸⁰

The final question of right-to-life literary theory asks: when they are faced with their mortality, do the characters in any literary work come to a realization that there is a divine presence in the world that justifies a life-affirming perspective? Fortunately, the main characters in both these novels need not concern themselves with a final religious reckoning. Christopher and Jonas and his companions have their lives ahead of them to explore the religious possibilities of their lives. The religious sensibility in Toole's short story, therefore, becomes all the more important for analysis since the characters are elderly, past their prime fighters, and, in Maggie's case, near death.

Eddie and Maggie have no religious background, and there is no evidence that either character is aware of basic religious teachings about death and the hereafter. Frankie, however, supplies some evidence that he is aware of the divine presence in the world, a presence that does not assist him, apparently, in deciding moral issues. Frankie's love for the sacramentals involved in worship were noted above. While aware of his religious duties as a Catholic ("In a few days it would be All Saints' Day, a Holy Day of Obligation"), he does not find strength in his faith ("Frankie hadn't received the Eucharist since Maggie's injury").⁸¹ His confession to his parish priest illustrates how conflicted he is about how he "murdered a girlieen.... In me mind."⁸²

The lack of an effective sensibility of the divine presence in the world can be attributed not only to critical disabilities scholars' rightful emphasis on the

⁸⁰ Fortunately, some critical disability scholars are not only aware, but also oppose euthanasia as a solution for a non-able-bodied person's existence. Their opposition spans the range from the casual notation of Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's remark that "All the films that return disabled charges to institutions – or worse, offer euthanasia" (p. 180) to the attempt at compromise offered by Lennard J. Davis: "I am not saying that euthanasia is a bad thing, but rather that until we understand the social and political implications of disability, we cannot always make rational decisions about the right to die" (p. 166).

⁸¹ Toole, p. 95.

⁸² Toole, p. 97.

body but also to their omission of other components of human life that most critical disabilities scholars dismiss. While philosophers and theologians must debate what elements constitute human nature, it should not be debatable that human nature concerns the physical body, yes, but also the soul, the mind, one's community with the living, one's communion with the dead, and one's responsibility to the future. A disabled person does not live merely for the sake of enabling his or her physical being for his or her span of eighty or more years; he or she also lives intellectually, socially, and, hopefully, spiritually.

Maggie, however, is solely concerned about her body. "I'ma dyin ever' day," she says to Frankie. "Now they're talkin 'bout cuttin off my ulcerated leg.... I'm gettin worse, boss.... I don't wont [sic] to live on like this."⁸³ Living as a quadriplegic presents problems, as critical disabilities scholars would say, for able-bodied persons more than the quadriplegics themselves. Having a leg amputated is further distressing, for both the quadriplegic and for others around him or her. It is unfortunate that Maggie could not move beyond her physicality and develop her mind or inquire into the existence of her soul. It may be a faulty comparison since no person's life is an exact match with another's, but if the atheist Stephen Hawking could live as a quadriplegic and yet develop his mind to an exceptional degree, then Maggie, asking to be killed, permanently foreclosed her opportunity to discover how she, the trailer trash from Theodosia, Missouri was a "gift from God."

This discussion hopes to demonstrate that critical disability studies has much in common with the right-to-life movement. Partisan differences aside, those who use critical disability studies as a vehicle for a greater understanding and appreciation of literature are proposing pro-life ideas without, apparently, being aware of it. While it is unfortunate that most academics who use critical disabilities theory cannot take the logical move to connect themselves with the pro-life movement, such a step is unnecessary, since pro-life faculty and students can make that connection for them. Thus, many thanks should be given to those academics who have advanced critical disabilities theory to where it is today. It is now up to contemporary pro-life faculty and students to take the theory to the next level, one that demonstrates how a life-affirming approach is manifest in even the most egregiously anti-life work of literature and can be overcome, "transgressed" in the parlance of jargon-laden academics, for the cause of protecting human life in whatever form it is found.

⁸³ Toole, p. 92.