Of "Innocents," "Idiots," and Being More Than Human: Characters with Intellectual Disability in Short Science Fiction

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Science Fiction and the Function of Intellect

Like other works of literature and genres of popular culture, science fiction has depicted disability in ways both powerful and problematic, featuring physically and neurologically atypical characters ranging from monstrous to superhuman in discourses on genetics, evolution, and the nature of social and scientific progress. By confronting our present society with images of strange or changing ones, science fiction offers a different way of seeing not only realities but also possibilities. Brian Aldiss locates "problems of power, literal or metaphorical ... at the heart of SF, the

fiction of a technological age" (qtd. in Flores 4). Similarly, Damien Broderick refers to SF as "that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supercession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal" (155). Such definitions are built on the studies of critics like Darko Suvin, who in the 1960s and 1970s, noting the rise of science fiction in technological countries like Russia, the US, and Japan, began offering structural and functional insight into science fiction by calling it "the literature of cognitive estrangement," where "the main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (59, 62). This alternative set of norms is introduced or underscored by an SF element that Suvin calls novum, which means "new," "novelty," "innovation," or "absent paradigm." Accordingly, Suvin breaks down the processes: "cognitive" refers to "a reflecting *of* but also *on* reality," and reality's "dynamic transformation," not "static mirroring" (64), whereas for "estrangement" he refers to a distancing, or defamiliarizing, in the way that the SF narrative "takes off from a fictional ('literary') hypothesis and develops it with extrapolating and totalizing ('scientific') rigor," where "[t]he effect of such factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set normative system ... with a point of view or glance implying a new set of norms" (60-61).

Damien Broderick further notes that SF is written in "a kind of code," and is thus embraced by readers who already have access to an encyclopedia of codes: the SF mega-text, consisting of "imaginary worlds, tropes, tools, lexicons, even grammatical innovations borrowed from other textualities" (xiii). SF readers are drawn to information and knowledge, not least of all in science and technology. Complimenting this reader culture is the presence of intelligent characters as well as the trope of non-human

sentience that includes aliens, robots, or AI. This novum often leads to a Darwinian contest between different intelligences, where only the fittest survives. In this paradigm, the lesser intelligence is doomed to perish. Here and there, however, are science fiction narratives that present alternative destinies. In refusing to accept normative perceptions of intelligence, these stories question what progress truly values, allowing us an understanding of what it means to be human within and beyond the dominant measures of science and technology.

Science fiction both illustrates and interrogates the ways in which people who fall below normative standards are perceived and treated in a given society. In the process of writing this paper, I sought to address two major questions. First, in a genre that places a high value on the intellect, how have neurotypical SF writers rendered characters with developmental disabilities? And second, how does the lens of disability contribute to the understanding of SF tropes in the negotiation of symbolism and lived experience?

I will be remiss not to acknowledge my personal stake in this project, and thus, some perspectives in disability studies. Like other parents of children with special needs, I have sought out doctors, therapists, special education experts, and medical textbooks to find out what is "wrong" with my child. Medical and educational perspectives offer a host of information, but while they can be significantly effective, they often locate disability in the same realm as disease, something that must be treated because it is a lesser state of being. It is only through the context of disability studies and science fiction that I have truly begun to embrace my daughter's difference, and to understand better the ways in which humanity is either defined or corroded by how this difference is perceived.

Imagining Characters with Intellectual Disabilities

Alicia Verlager and Jenny Kendrick observe the dichotomy of representations of people with disabilities across literary genres. Verlager notes that in Shakespeare, Caliban and Ariel represent deformity and disembodiment, respectively. Corresponding to this is the depiction of the disabled as either monsters or angels, evil destroyers or innocent victims, and burdens or blessings. Mere sympathy for, and the transcendence of, disability are, however, not necessarily positive. Studying 19th century novels, Lois Keith finds that people with disability must learn "patience, cheerfulness and making the best of things," that disability is a form of punishment, and that disability can be cured (qtd. in Kendrick, par. 30). In her survey of 20th century novels for young readers, Keith notes that while the religious framework is no longer so prominent, the expectation of transcendence still manifests itself in the mentality "see the person, not the disability," that is, "The real self, the one that matters, can never incorporate the braces, crutches or wheelchair. The real 'you' is the one within, the spirit rather than the corporal body" (par. 18). This philosophy of impairment as a prison has led to the recurrence of self-loathing and early death in the stories. Thus, Keith wonders about the failure of writers to imagine characters with disabilities as living long, fulfilled lives.

Playwright and fiction writer Susan Nussbaum ascribes the hopelessness she felt when she first became disabled to books and films that featured disabled characters:

> Tiny Tim was long-suffering and angelic and was cured at the end. Quasimodo was a monster who loved in vain and was killed at the end, but it was

for the best. Lenny was a child who killed anything soft, and George had to shoot him. Ahab was a bitter amputee and didn't care how many died in his mad pursuit to avenge himself on a whale. Laura Wingeld had a limp so no man would ever love her … None of those people writing books and movies that exploited their disabled characters as "symbols" were disabled themselves. (par. 2)

To Nussbaum, and to other writers with disability like Jane Stemp and Lois Keith, the solution has been to create disabled characters who are neither monsters nor angels, who can live healthy lives, and who are not rendered powerless by their bitterness or self-loathing – in other words, characters with desires and complexities that are not intrinsically bound by their impairment.

This brings us to the problem of representation as defined between disabled and non-disabled viewpoints. Like Keith, Allison Piepmeier explains that for the non-disabled, the experience of disability is often accessible only as metaphor: "a burden that stands in for something else in the non-disabled person's life, an impetus for gratitude or religious commitment, or a sentimental lesson that warms the heart," while for people with disabilities and their families, it is a "lived reality" (sec. 2, par. 2). She adds that the definition of disability as socially and culturally constructed is rooted in the interactions of "lived experience" and the "symbolic realm." Thus, the lens of disability can be a powerful way of critiquing social attitudes and how they uplift or annihilate marginalized individuals.

If indeed all fiction is metaphor as Ursula Le Guin asserts, then disability may well provide significations for both the disabled and non-disabled, as long as the lived

experiences of people with disability remain in the discourse. This is one way in which the non-disabled can culturally accommodate neurodiversity. Working from my current research, I differentiate among three groups of narratives that present various ways in which characters with intellectual disability and co-morbid developmental conditions are granted, or removed of, function:

Intellectual disability as satirical device. First is that set of science fiction stories that are largely satirical, where the condition of intellectual disability as defined by low IQ evokes negative traits that pose problems to the advancement of civilization. These traits include stubbornness, close-mindedness, poor social behavior, unsophisticated language, gullibility, and shallowness. Often, these satires shed light on the culture of mediocrity, the dynamics of power, and the influence of institutions within a given society.

A well-known example of this narrative is the 2006 film *Idiocracy*, in which an average Joe wakes up in a future society populated by idiots. "Idiocy" in this world occurs in a highly commodified context: the people who populate this world are deeply entrenched in a superficial culture of reality TV shows, celebrity status, and brand name products. By illustrating stupidity in this context, this alternative set of norms, where all the smart, accomplished people have died out and only the stupid remain, allows us to reflect on our own reality's commodified and superficial culture. The possibility of critique is magnified by the exaggeration of commercial and celebrity elements, such as the elected American president being wrestling champ Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho.

Idiocracy and its light-hearted critique of a boorish, superficial culture may find their roots in C. M. Kornbluth's

"The Marching Morons" (1951), except that there is a vital social stratification in this funny, allusion-rich, but much darker novella. In this future, the world is overrun by billions of "morons" whose IQs average at 45, while slaving in the background to preserve order and civilization are a few million "elite," descendants of an "improved breed" that geneticists created fearing the population problem. The enlightened elite have considered everything "rational" to urge the genetic line of morons to die out, but it is only through John Barlow, a real estate conman who has awoken from suspended animation, that an "irrational or subrational" solution is presented: active and vicious deceit. Barlow deliberately appropriates Hitler's Final Solution: the morons are lured into emigrating to Venus in their poorly built rocketships, which get them killed. Propaganda and fake postcards entice families, cities, and nations to flock to the rockets until only the elite remain. As a final cleanup, the elite push Barlow into a spaceship as well, telling him that such a solution would never have occurred to them. The elite truly are an improved breed, intellectually superior to the morons and, evidently, morally superior to Barlow — and so, both the morons and Barlow, all of whom are inferior, must die.

A third and more blatantly satirical example is Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" (1961). The short story begins with a clear exposition: "The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal" — and thus urges the reader to interrogate the meaning and implications of equality, as the story unfolds to reveal the novum of handicap. Instead of uplifting its inferior members, this society pushes excelling individuals down to the designated level of normal by handicapping them with comical masks, weights of birdshot, and intermittent, horrendously deafening radio transmissions that disrupt memory and trains of thought. For all the ambiguity of theme in "Harrison Bergeron," and

thus its susceptibility to various political interpretations, the story's obviousness as satire provides fewer problems than a story like "The Marching Morons" or *Idiocracy* does, where the premise of the novum is an oversimplification of intelligence, or the lack of it, as a hereditary trait, rather than as a product of powerful institutions.

Even though these stories illustrate intellectual disability in the context of anti-intellectual culture, this culture is established more as a symptom than as a possible cause, locating the disability in people's genes instead. Such stories then endorse an inaccurate medical model, adding to the already negative associations of people with intellectual disability as uncivilized obstacles to social progress. After all, even though it can be argued that intellectual disability is only used here metaphorically, such associations are toxifying. If indeed we are willing to consider disability as a social category rather than solely a medical one, then perhaps the choice of disability itself as a symbol for anything negative, whether a personal hardship or a social ill, is as complex and problematic as the choice of "girl," "gay," or "Filipino" as descriptors for weakness or foolishness.

SF nova as developmental disability. Of interest here are narratives where a sentient creature is created and the imperfections of its development are tested against the expectations of its "parents" and the norms of its larger community. This created consciousness has taken form in various nova, including artificial intelligence, organic monsters, and clones. Although any SF narrative where a nonhuman interacts with human society can be viewed as symbolic of disability and people's attitudes toward it, I will refer to a seminal SF work to illustrate the novum's resemblance to cognitive and developmental impairments and the creator/parent's inability to cope with these, given

that parental responsibility has played a prominent role in the construction of developmental disabilities throughout history.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, Or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is a surprisingly textured portrayal of the struggle between the creator and his monster. Victor Frankenstein is a scientist obsessed with the idea of reanimation, driven forward by such thoughts as, "A new species would bless me as its creator and source ... No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (47). However, all paternal desires and delusions die as he beholds the monster: "His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs" (51).

Verlager notes that "one of the aspects which make the creature 'monstrous' is his inability to communicate," and in the story we discover that after learning to discern one sensory information from another (104-106), he studies language for a long time in order to communicate with humans. Like Victor, however, everyone is overcome with fear at the sight of the creature, and when he is beaten and driven away, he accepts his relationship to humans as an "everlasting war against the species" (143).

The Romantic milieu in which Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* lends to a reading of the story as a cautionary tale, a commentary on overreaching and hubris. Stephen King, however, wonders if Frankenstein's tragic fault lies in that "hubris ... or in his failure to take responsibility" (53). The frame story structure further leads to questions: should the reader believe that he is in fact a fiend, a wretch, a daemon, or is this Victor's aversion and lack of culpability

impinging on our opinions? The characterization of that "daemon" as a lonely, murderous product of human rejection is powerful enough to measure against Victor and his frustratingly lengthy periods of confusion and fickle-mindedness. When the monster, knowing that humans will never accept him, convinces Victor to build him a bride, Victor destroys the new creature for fear that the union between the monster and his bride will grow into a new evil species. Unfortunately Victor's fear is located in the naturalness of evil in such unnatural creatures; nowhere does he consider social rejection as the fuel for the monster's evil deeds. Victor's fear, then, resembles the sociocultural bias against the intellectually disabled, upon whom legal compulsory sterilization was once enacted. As such, rather than simply taking the novel as a narrative of hubris, we must consider it an interrogation of the natural, the monstrous, and man's ability to define the boundaries of these concepts.

Intellectual disability as lived experience. For this final set of stories, we grant Anupama Iyer's observation about the "inherent difficulties" that exist in the act of representing a character with cognitive impairments in fiction:

> [These difficulties are] usually overcome in fiction by the *narrator's empathy* and the *technical accuracy* of the characterisation. In terms of both techniques, intellectual disability poses a fundamental paradox. When writers "speak" for a character with intellectual disability they essentially impose their *creative intelligence* on what is meant to be the world view of a character defined by intellectual limitations. (128, my italics)

From an ongoing survey of bibliographies and anthologies I have found only a few SF short stories that provide significant space to characters for whom disability is a lived experience. These characters and their stories were selected for their interesting negotiation of the challenges cited by Iyer: Lone from Theodore Sturgeon's "The Fabulous Idiot," a novella published with two others to form *More Than Human* (1953), Charlie from Daniel Keyes' famous short story "Flowers for Algernon" (1959), Rye from Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" (1983), Cara from Maureen McHugh's "Frankenstein's Daughter" (2003), and Hannah from Nancy Fulda's "Movement" (2011). Five important points can be used to analyze the depiction of these characters: focalization, the discourse of cure, the role of family and community, character descriptors, and the possibility of agency.

1] Focalization. To counter social and cultural stereotypes, a story must first imagine a character with cognitive impairments as an individual—one who, despite difficulties with language and communication, has an "inner world which gives the behaviour [that evinces disability] meaning" (Kendrick, par. 21). Thus, both the disability and its own logic are acknowledged. Such a character must then be imagined with a voice, and therefore human consciousness; otherwise, he or she is just a "signifier of disability," as Kendrick puts it, stressing that "[i]n order to be a signifier not merely a vehicle of significance, a character with learning disabilities, like his or her real-life counterpart, has to take equal place in the cast list: to be in the plot, not isolated from it" (par. 35).

Lone, Charlie, Rye, and Hannah are the focus of their respective stories. In "The Fabulous Idiot," an omniscient narrator shifts between Lone and a few other characters, but the narrative follows his long and painful journey from

idiocy to the *Homo gestalt*, an evolved consciousness formed from the psychic merging with other individuals; Lone "organized it, or it formed around him" (Sturgeon 70). Lone begins this journey as a vagrant completely devoid of language and empathy. When he is jarred from this internal world of silence and learns, very gradually, to speak and integrate with an adoptive family, it is considered nothing short of a miracle (11).

Rye, the central intelligence in "Speech Sounds," suffers with the rest of the world from an illness that has caused severe language impairment, varying degrees of intellectual impairment, and death, which is how Rye lost her husband, their children, and everyone she considered family (Butler 95-96). In the story she is on a futile search for relatives when she meets a man who inadvertently leads her to recovering her faith in the future.

"Flowers for Algernon" is told by Charlie in epistolary style, with each section taking the form of a "progress report" as part of the documentation for an experimental surgery. With an IQ of 68, Charlie is a slow learner who qualifies to participate in the experiment because of his good motivation (Keyes 608). After the surgery, the language in his reports shows a steady improvement, and the exponential growth of his reading ability and his mastery of the arts and sciences also become evident in the entries, along with his understanding of himself and other people.

"Movement" is an example of a story where the author's "creative intelligence" (Iyer 128) must be granted, given that to Hannah, "[w]ords are such fleeting, indefinite things" (Fulda, sec. 1), and as such the entire telling of the story in the first person point of view can only be symbolic of her seemingly quiet but intensely rich inner world.

Hannah, a young teenager, has temporal autism—a fictional condition that resembles autism's apparent impairment of language and social interaction.

Cara in "Frankenstein's Daughter" differs from our other samples in that despite being the titular character, the story is actually her mother's. Cara's being a clone qualifies this story for that group of narratives where the trope is a metaphor for developmental delay, but I include it here because the intellectual disability is also a literal one that plays a role in the family's brokenness. Cara is six, and according to her brother, "she's retarded so she's more like three or four and she'll probably never be more than about four or five" (McHugh 168). She does not speak much beyond single words, and when, unable to express what she wants, all she says is "Uhhh" (169), it resembles the depiction of the monster's language impairment in film versions of Frankenstein. Because Cara is not the real center of her story, her inner voice is never truly heard.

Focalization grants a consciousness represented by language. In the four other sample stories here, language impairment either reflects the poorness of intellect, as with Charlie and Rye, or is strategically juxtaposed with the attempts at complex processing, in the case of Lone and Hannah.

2] The discourse of cure. Reacting to a discussion about curing Down syndrome, Michael Bérubé laments that "the discourse of the cure is everywhere, and the discourse of reasonable accommodation ... is ... almost like a kind of sign language, spoken only by those who are already disability-literate." He emphasizes that, while some disabilities are related to life-threatening diseases, they are not interchangeable. To equate disability with disease is to assume that there is something wrong with the person. Jane

Stemp observes that the offer of cure or the "chance to change" has often been woven into fantasy and SF stories that feature characters with disabilities, noting that SF authors in particular, "however willing to cast a satirical eye on earlier notions of 'progress', seem reluctant to abandon the hope that a perfected medical system will yet cure all the ills of the world" (par. 7).

Of our five samples, the discourse of cure is the most obvious in the stories of Charlie, Hannah, and Cara. As the subject of an intelligence-enhancing experiment, Charlie responds directly to this discourse by questioning the very nature of intelligence. Later, Charlie understands the nature of intelligence as the ability to improve the lives of those who lack the capacity to interact fully with the world. The "chance to change" also comes directly for Hannah as her parents consider a new procedure— "direct synaptic grafting"—that can "fix" her neural processing and thus cure her temporal autism. Through Hannah's point of view, the story demonstrates the limitations of both old techniques and technological advancement. In this intersection of tradition and technology, Hannah reflects on the nature of her condition and her identity—should she attempt to be "normal" like other teenagers, or should she view her difference as an evolution?

The story attempts to subvert the medical model of disability, but critics of "Movement" have argued that the effectiveness of this project may have been lessened by the name for Hannah's condition: "temporal autism." Hannah herself isn't at ease with the term (sec. 1); additionally she infers that "... there are other people like [her] ... we are the result of a recent mutation" (sec. 3). The implication, then, is that the novum of the story is not just the possibility of cure, as in "Flowers for Algernon"— in "Movement," the disability itself is a novum, thus distinguishing itself and its

positive qualities from the real spectrum condition that is autism.

Cara's world is intricately tied with the medical world, both because she is a clone and because she has physical illnesses. In the emergency room, her mother's grief and worry are exacerbated by the doctor's treatment of Cara as an interesting subject rather than as an actual child. The novum here is the clone Cara, and while there is no mention of curing her developmental delay, like her respiratory trouble it is seen alongside society's condemnation of cloning: her defects validate the public opinion that she should not exist.

In the story of Rye no cure for intellectual impairment is offered, but the disabilities are portrayed as inextricable from destructive behavior. In this way, "Speech Sounds" resembles the allegorical dystopias earlier discussed, where intellectual disability is used to signify all that is wrong with the human race, except that Butler's protagonist is herself impaired. That no cure exists has driven her to thoughts of suicide; she diverts her thoughts to protecting herself, and in the end, to teaching and protecting others. The story concludes with the possibility that the generations born after the outbreak may no longer be impaired. Rye's decision to live with her impairment saves the story from what Graham Sleight has called "avoidance," that is, the removal of disability from the SF world, which to Sleight seems indicative of the inability of SF writers to imagine a disabled person's contribution to a narrative as long as the impairment exists.

Sleight further notes that in cases where technology has no cure, there appears in its stead the effort of compensation, such as the granting of superpowers to disabled characters. This effort is apparent in "The Fabulous

Idiot," where no cure is truly offered, given that Lone and the other disabled characters here are so impoverished and isolated that any medical treatment is out of their reach. To grant them agency, however, Sturgeon "compensates" for these disadvantages by giving them psychic abilities. Lone's use of his mind control starts out as purely instinctive, but as he makes his way out of his intellectual stupor, he learns to read other people with more intent. The novum of the gestalt is created from his psychic merging with other characters. However, because Lone who is its head is an "idiot," the gestalt's achievements are also limited.

3] The role of family and community. Because the development of people with cognitive difficulties does not meet typical expectations, nor do they access basic concepts and cultural codes the way typical children do, parents, teachers, or other community figures play an important role in the lives of people with developmental disabilities. In her study of memoirs written by parents of children with special needs, Allison Piepmeier observes that the narrative of excessive grief dehumanizes the child, but the narration of affection and pleasure counteracts this (sec. 4). Thus, grief and pleasure can be determinants of the disabled person's position in his or her family even in science fiction.

Of our examples, Hannah has the most traditional family. She has a technologically oriented father who wants to "fix" her and a mother who loves her but doesn't understand her (Fulda, sec. 1); a "calm and quiet" brother (sec. 4); and grandparents who "know the words for temporal autism, but ... do not understand what it means" (sec. 5). She is the most comfortable with her brother because he "does not expect [her] to be anything other than what [she is]" (sec. 4). She is aware that her condition is causing friction between her parents, and that the technological paradigm of her society finds her wanting,

even though she clearly perceives her own potential. Her tragedy is that she cannot make her parents see what she sees: so entrenched are they in their worries and their desire to fix her that they are unable to recognize her happiness.

Cara's family seems traditional until we find out that she is just a clone of an older daughter who died. To the older brother Robert she is a defective version of the dead sister; even to the mother Jenna, who evidently loves her "Cara mia," the clone is a mistake. If Cara is Frankenstein's daughter, then Jenna is Frankenstein for giving life to Cara. Jenna's grief objectifies Cara— it is grief from the older daughter's death, from Cara's respiratory problems and developmental delay, from people's opinion of cloning as a transgression. To Jenna and her society, Cara's defects prove that she shouldn't exist.

The three other stories illustrate non-traditional families, or at least, bonds—and it is in such social relationships that we are able to see disability in a larger context. Rye, who lost her husband and children to the illness, finds a lover but loses him immediately, and in her anger and despair at this terrible world of intellectually impaired people, she almost abandons two small children whose mother has just died. Lone's original family is mentioned, but apparently he and the other disabled characters have all been abandoned, all "solitary things hurt by the same thing" (Sturgeon 22). Lone's real development only begins with the childless Prodds, from whom he learns a little language, farm work, and a sense of belonging. While Lone has had doubts about his relationship with the Prodds, this bond is what allows him to form the gestalt with the children.

Keyes' novel version of "Flowers for Algernon" describes the hatred that Charlie's family felt for him when

he was a child, but the short story focuses on Charlie's present relationships—with his teacher, his doctors, and his co-workers at the factory—which become strained as his intelligence increases. He only realizes that he has developed an intellectual elitism when he witnesses people at a diner laughing at a "mentally retarded" busboy (625). When Charlie regresses, he believes that everyone's kindness is due to pity—he is, after all, a man who has touched the sky and then fallen—but it is possible that his fall has gained for him some respect, as when his boss, upon finding out what has happened, tells him "Charlie Gordon you got guts" (633).

4] *Human, subhuman, or more than human descriptions.* The effective portrayal of a character often relies on physical, psychological, and sociological dimensions. However, problems arise in the description of characters with intellectual disability when, as Iyer observes, "[m]annerisms and accessories are used to further demarcate individuals with intellectual disability from other people" (129). This demarcation, Iyer adds, has the extra function of "protect[ing] readers from the fear that the character described could possibly be them" (129), and thus can be instrumental in reinforcing the cultural bias against people with disability. Notably, the construction of characters with intellectual disabilities in the utilitarian worlds of SF almost always addresses the validity of their existence. Because they do not have the same capacities as "normal" people, of what use are they to society? Or, to evoke the ethical dilemma that comes with prenatal testing and the termination of pregnancies upon the detection of certain disabilities: is keeping this life-form alive worth the trouble?

Jane Stemp points out that in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* books, "Helva's situation posits a social

environment where people with disabilities can only be of value if they are also of use" (par. 16). A similar attempt at validating the existence of the disabled is apparent in Philip K. Dick's "The Minority Report," where the task of predicting crime is given to the "precogs," described as "[v]egetable-like ... The three gibbering, fumbling creatures, with their enlarged heads and wasted bodies, were contemplating the future" (3). Physically and cognitively mutated, the precogs are shocking to behold, but their usefulness is accepted in the story as a worthy trade-off for their humanity.

Animal comparisons provide more agency than "vegetable-like," and in fact can be both positive and accurate. Sturgeon's description of Lone reflects how the effect of such comparisons depends on how the animal itself is perceived: "He was purely animal—a degrading thing to be among men. But most of the time he was an animal away from men. As an animal in the wood he moved like an animal, beautifully" (1). Iyer notes that "[r]esemblance to and kinship with animals is often called forth to emphasize the difference of people with intellectual disabilities and signal that they are not quite human" (129), but this kinship can also represent a worldview that has sympathy for a weaker species. Temple Grandin in fact attributes her animal advocacy to both growing up on a farm and the qualities of her autism, saying, "If you're a visual thinker, it's easier to identify with animals ... If all your thought processes are in language, how could you imagine that cattle think?" (qtd. in Sacks 266).

As such, when we see an animal metaphor used to describe a person with disability, we must evaluate not only the image itself but the attitude that informs the comparison. "Flowers for Algernon" capitalizes on the parallelism of development between Charlie and the mouse

Algernon, and from the outside, the comparison to the mouse reflects the smallness of Charlie's status as an intellectually disabled man. From Charlie's point of view, though, the affinity between man and mouse is both emotional and rational, as Algernon's regression foreshadows Charlie's own.

Not quite as human are the animal references used to describe the characters in "Speech Sounds" and "Frankenstein's Daughter." In her aversion to the behavior of the severely impaired people, Rye compares their screaming and jumping to the aggressive rituals of primates, and describes children "chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees" as having no future (Butler 101). As for Cara, we first see her through her brother Robert's point of view: "She was born big. Big bones like a cow ... Kelsey [from whom Cara was cloned] wasn't retarded or as big as a cow" (McHugh 168). Robert also compares her to their dog: "She perks up the way Shelby, our Shetland Sheepdog does, when you say 'treat'" (169).

In an effort to resist the subhuman descriptions of disability, writers have also imagined impaired characters as superhuman, corresponding with the cultural stereotype of neuroatypical people as savants. Resembling this effort of compensation is the depiction of Hannah, who is characterized as a gifted dancer with a superior way of seeing the movement of time. Additionally, her existence is compared to "a magnificent blossom, larger and more colorful than any I have seen before, but the ordinary stem is too spindly to support this innovation. The blossom lies crushed against the sidewalk, overshadowed by the smaller, sturdier plants that crowd above it" (Fulda, sec. 2).

Sturgeon's treatment of the superhuman trope in "The Fabulous Idiot" is particularly interesting. The story takes people with disabilities and speculates about their worth by giving them the beginnings of psychic abilities. However, neither their disabilities nor their superpowers subsume their respective personalities. Instead of addressing the validity of their existence, the presence of both disability and superpower create a means for their personalities to interact, and consequently, for the homo gestalt to be born.

5] The possibility of agency. A character's agency can be mapped through his or her desire, the obstacles that interrupt its fulfillment, and the destiny that results from the confrontation with these obstacles. We look at these three aspects in the focal characters Charlie, Lone, Rye, and Hannah.

Charlie expresses his desire explicitly: "I want to be smart" (Keyes 605). In light of his self-consciousness and his need to please, this desire is, at its heart, "I want to do good for others." The obstacle to Charlie's desire is the impermanence of the surgery's effect, resulting in his regression. Confronting this impermanence, Charlie rushes his academic work to its logical conclusion: that the surgery is an "experimental failure," but that "an experimental failure or the disproving of a theory was as important to the advancement of learning as a success would be" (628). In this sense, then, he achieves what he set out to do and more, because the good he has done extends from his scientific contribution to his immediate community, which begins to recognize his strength and accommodate his weakness. While he finds consolation in this, he cannot suffer the pity of the people around him, so he leaves.

85

What Lone wants is to know what he is, but at the same time, to resist it, because he is an outcast whose search for identity is rooted in finding a place in a world that doesn't want him. In this sense, the obstacles to his search are defined by his lacks: his intellectual impairment and his being cast out. When Lone understands that he is the gestalt's head, he achieves the desire to know who he is and what he belongs to. Because he is an idiot, though, then so is the gestalt—thus the novella's title "The Fabulous Idiot" refers to the gestalt as much as to Lone. However, Sturgeon does not locate this "idiocy" simply in Lone's disability, using instead an image that represents the never-ending process of knowledge. One goal is thus replaced with an even higher one:

> "And we'll grow, Baby. We just got born!"

> "He says not on your life ... We can do practically anything but we most likely won't. He says we're a thing, all right, but the thing is an idiot."

> So it was that Lone came to know himself; and like the handful of people who have done so before him he found, at this pinnacle, the rugged foot of a mountain. (37)

Rye's concrete goal is Pasadena where her remaining relatives are supposed to live, but we soon realize that what she really seeks is hope. What hinders her from achieving this is the chaos of intellectual impairment pervading the city, as her being alone puts her at risk of rape or death. Just when she thinks she no longer has to be hopeless and lonely, however, she loses her new companion. In the end, she still achieves her desire through the two unimpaired children she adopts.

Articulating what Hannah wants is made difficult by the "offer of cure" premise. Her mother asks, "Would you like to be more like other teenagers?" (Fulda, sec. 1), and she is unable to answer. Later, however, Hannah thinks, "I do not know what I should want" (sec. 2). So trapped is she by the offer of cure and the conflicting opinions of her parents that even her desire is muffled by a sense of obligation. Eventually we realize that she wants to be accepted for what she is, including her condition—or, to appropriate the story's objective correlative, to keep dancing in her old ballet slippers— which allows her a breathtaking view of the world. What stops her from getting her desire is the normative belief that her condition should be fixed. Thus, her destiny is not quite certain: when she puts her ballet slippers on top of the doctor's materials about the new procedure and says, "I do not want new shoes," will her mother understand?

In these four narratives, the social component of disability plays a prominent part in developing conflict. The central characters with cognitive impairments desire some form of belonging, whether through their search for hope, recognition, or integration, and the obstacles they meet stem from the larger community's desire for sameness or "normality." The results of these struggles are as bittersweet as any story with non-disabled characters, but there are other problems that recur, and should be further explored in other papers.

First, the validation of a character's humanity appears to be quite an issue in stories that feature disability, especially if the impairment is cognitive in nature and causes a lack of social connection, self-awareness, and/or language. The non-disabled characters are often unaware that their acts of cruelty or charity can dehumanize the disabled characters. Thus, the trials that the disabled

characters undergo often lean toward recognition of their humanity, or perhaps "belonging" or "sameness"—a goal that does not seem to dominate fiction with only typically developing characters.

Second, the acceptance or rejection provided by the closest social bonds, often parental figures, is depicted as crucial to the agency of a character with developmental disabilities. As such, the conflicts of parenting, such as having one foot each in the disabled and non-disabled worlds, can make for further study—particularly the mothers' burden of love, fear, and guilt, considering that past social and pseudo-medical constructions of intellectual disability located the gene of "idiocy" in mothers.

This leads me to a third problem of interest: sexuality and gender, and their role in the portrayal of characters with developmental disabilities as having sufficient agency. In the four stories with such characters as protagonist, a dichotomy is evident: the men are *feared* as agents of violence while women are *feared for* as its recipients. Lone in *More Than Human*, for example, does not comprehend the extent of violation he commits when he accesses a woman's mind for the books she has read. On the other hand, Rye periodically encounters the possibility of rape, and Hannah's wandering off causes her father, in particular, to panic about her safety.

Science fiction is a fascinating venue not only for engaging the medical and social models of disability but also for interrogating the natures of intelligence, technology, and progress. The tropes and devices of science fiction can magnify the diversity of experience in the realm of developmental disability, revealing characters' inner worlds and everyday lives as textured, complex, and rational and thus navigating or resisting social and cultural stereotypes.

In turn, the lens of disability enriches the SF mega-text, providing both a new way of seeing to people without disabilities, and an entry point for the lived experiences of people with disabilities and their families, who are all in search of possibility beyond the limits of a diagnosis.

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