



The Disabled Body: Coetzee's *Slow Man* and Narration, Identity and Autonomy

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Abstract

Slow Man (2005), J. M. Coetzee forges a sophisticated intertwining of disability, entrapment, and selfhood, particularly through the character of Paul Rayment, whose existence undergoes radical transformation as a consequence of severe injury. This paper studies the disability of the protagonist not as a field of deficits, but as a locus of perpetual restructuring of the negotiation of identity and freedom. The disability studies framework, in conjunction with the theory of representation, foregrounds the argument that Coetzee refuses to entertain rehabilitation narratives that tie the notions of recovery and social isomorphism. Rather, in *Slow Man*, the entrapment, idleness, and exposure of enslavement destabilize the critical postulates of equality and self-determination. The self-referentiality and the obtrusive voice of the author invite the reader to reflect upon literature the problems of the dual and, often, paradoxical, absence in power and representation, and, simultaneously, the presence in power and self-determination of the disabled and the disabled. This paper discusses how *Slow Man* engages with critical ableism by showing disability not as a temporary absence of the ideal body, but a reminder of our humanity configured with the social, the narrative, and the moral.

Keywords: disability studies, embodiment, identity, autonomy, narrative ethics

Introduction

In contemporary fiction, disability is increasingly being viewed not as a problem in need of a solution, but as a site of significant negotiation in relation to the identity, autonomy, and social interdependence of self and others. The medical model of disability situates the impairment as an individual deviation, thus overlooking the social, moral, and narrative spaces that bring the disability to be. J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005) is a novel that exemplifies the positioning of disability as an embodied condition that unsettles the liberal humanist paradigms of liberation and self-mastery. The narrative recounts

the life of Paul Rayment, a character whose life changes dramatically after losing a leg due to a cycling accident.

This study will show that Coetzee, most likely instead of embracing narratives of recovery or heroic redemptions, recovery, points to 'slowness' and the 'vulnerability' of the body, and body 'disability' as a condition, social or otherwise, that speaks to the struggle of social recognition of the body. Paul's enduring struggle to assert his autonomy, even in a state of dependence, adds to the social strife of inseparable body impairment and dominant social structure expectations of productivity and



independence. As disability studies scholars have pointed out, the most evident social interdependence of autonomy is found in the condition of disability (Davis 31).

This article is concerned with the depiction of the disabled body in *Slow Man* as a contested site of identity and agency. This study aims to propose, using the concepts of quintessence, precaution, and control of the narrative, that Coetzee is bringing to the fore the ableist assumptions inherent in current notions of independence and progress.

Research Objectives

1. Understanding the representation of physical disability in *Slow Man*.
2. Investigating the connection between embodiment and identity in Paul Rayment.
3. Examining the tension of autonomy and dependency in the work.
4. To disclose the narrative technique employed by Coetzee through the prism of Disability Studies.
5. To scrutinize the text's treatment of the rehabilitation and normalization discourses.

Research Methodology

The research here conducted qualitative textual analysis. The primary text is J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005). The analysis is framed within Disability Studies particularly the social model of disability and embodiment theories.

The critical works of Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Michael Oliver form the secondary sources. Narrative voice, character construction, and metafictional strategies are analyzed through the technique of close reading. Research is documented in MLA Style.

Research Gap

1. Criticism of *Slow Man*'s ethics and metafictional techniques has been abundant, yet no scholarship exists that makes disability the focal point of analysis.
2. Most of the scholarship has a tendency to treat Paul Rayment's disability either as a metaphor for a philosophical quandary, or view it as a

matter of negligible significance. This research seeks to sustain the treatment of disability as a lived, embodied, and socially constructed phenomenon, and in so doing, demonstrate how identity and autonomy are ascribed to disability, rather than being constructed around it.

3. Disability scholars explain that it is the social and cultural constructs surrounding disability, not the biological construct of the disability, that the disability is a result of.
4. As an example, Lennard J. Davis analyzes the use of "normalcy" as a way to marginalize people who are bodily different (Davis 29). Garland Rose Thomson notes the importance of different literary genres to discuss how society imagines the different configurations of bodies that are disabled (Garland-Thomson 5). In Michael Oliver's social model of disability, the focus of disability shifts from the individual to the social structures that are disabling because they are not accessible and accommodating (Oliver 11).
5. Most critics have analyzed *Slow Man* with a focus on metafiction and the ambivalence of the moral aspects of the novel. However, the novel from the perspective of Disability Studies maintains the focus on the body, the care of the body, and the resistance to the body and narratives that aim to restore the body to some notion of normalcy. This scholarship is unique because it puts disability at the very center of the discussion.

Slowness – Identity and Autonomy in *Slow Man*

Slow Man signals temporality and embodiment as central to J. M. Coetzee's disability and to explain, by proximate means, the disruption of some modern ideals of speed, productivity, and efficiency. The slow movement of Paul Rayment in the novel does not happen by chance nor is it simply a result of his accident. Rather, it is a phenomenon that has an ideological position and soul that embodies the culture that is described as systematically hostile to the dis/n/abled. It has become normal within contemporary society, in the absence of a social



conscience and empathy to regard a person as a “failure” due to their “inability” to “efficiently, worthfully, and quickly” (Lennard, J. Davis, *When the Disabled Body is Seen*, 2015, 35) ‘move’. This is a result of ‘modernity’ in its most unadulterated form bound by the demands of industrialization and capitalism.

Paul’s accident, and the subsequent inability to bear weight on his legs, catapults him to a new, and in some sense, subversive, rhythm of existence. It is, profoundly, in relation to the fault lines of life that he knows that existence does not “move” in the sense of “forward”. It is in the form of a series of “obligatory” “pauses,” “delays,” and “dependencies”. He is divergent to the culture that is ‘progressive’ and ‘modern’.

The title of the novel also speaks to the complexity of masculine identity. After the incident, Paul feels like a “disabled old man” (Coetzee). Losing his control over his body and routines, he feels profoundly emasculated, given that he was once a fully autonomous person. It exemplifies the difficulty of reintegration and the rejection of reintegration rehabilitation narratives and rehabilitation that suggests returning to the normal. Paul does not wish to be reintegrated and be *patched-up and sent back into the world as if nothing had happened* (Coetzee). The novel does critique the ableist and the patriarchal assumption the restoration of the body signifies restoration of the male.

The thread of negotiation of Paul Rayment’s identity is stretched throughout the narrative by the disabled body of Paul Rayment. Loss and absence in reference to the prosthesis of the leg are at once located and victorious in the absence of the prosthetic. Paul’s discomfort with his body suggests that he is not willing to be made ‘whole’ by other people’s standards. He states, with discomfort, that the device is better described as not *mine* and *not a part of me* (Coetzee). The norm of invisibility attributed to the prosthetic body, or the assimilating prosthetic body, as adjusted selves are culturally rendered invisible by normative standards, is what Garland-Thomson calls the relaxed selves (Garland-Thomson 8).

In this context, for instance, in *Slow Man*, the disability in question is not perceived as an inadequacy that requires the provision of solutions. It is rather an inadequate deficiency, an inadequate absence that need not be resolved, and is rather a state of being that keeps shifting the focus toward reinvention of identity. The novel has also tackled the systems of power inherent in the concepts of care and the dependency that comes with it. Paul’s sense of lack of control and the oppressive nature of his condition is caused by his dependence on Marijana. He expresses his contempt for being “at the mercy of others” and being “humiliated by the need to accept help” (Coetzee). Being independent is something he longs for and is something he craves. He reveals his dependence, showing that it is out of his control and is a constructing force.

In this case, disability plays a critical role in challenging the notions of restrictive liberal humanism. In essence the idea of a self-sufficient human being is viewed to be the cornerstone of humanity. The story of Elizabeth Costello, a metafictional character, who attempts to craft a cohesive story for Paul, further complicates attempts to regain control. Costello’s intrusions are akin to those of the numerous disabled people whose lives are subject to control by the medical, institutional, and cultural gatekeepers. Paul defies her authority, saying, “This is my life. You have no right” (Coetzee), and he resists being a character in her story. This example of defiance serves as an indicator as to what extent people with disabilities are objectified and how the control of one’s own narrative is a real struggle absent of control while being narrative.

Disability in *Slow Man* is collective and as a condition of the body, time and (lack of) control of the narrative, combats prevailing norms, masculinities, and autonomy. Using the concepts of slowness, dependence, and defiance of the normalization process, Coetzee conveys disability as, a lack in the moral, intellectual, and social spheres. The novel asks the reader whose bodies are seen as worthless, whose stories are of no worth, and what



value society places on living when one's life is accompanied by weakness.

Conclusion

The condition of disability is exemplified in *Slow Man* by the fact that autonomy and identity are social constructs that are not grounded in reality. The narratives of rehabilitation, slowness, dependence, and vulnerability, push the ableist focus on self-sufficient and productive disregard. The social model of disability best describes this novel, as it illustrates that disability is a result of social, not physical, factors (Oliver 11). Emphasizing narrative control and embodiment, *Slow Man* also addresses disability as relational and ethical, rather than a loss. In its own right, Coetzee's novel advances contemporary fiction and Disability Studies by inviting readers to rethink autonomy, care, and the fullness of life that may be lived in and through a bodily difference. In bringing to the foreground autonomy and identity in contemporary being, *Slow Man* indicates the frailty of the evaluative criteria that contiguously tether a person's worth to being autonomous, mobile, and economically productive. Paul Rayment's disobedience to the dominant discourses of rehabilitation is also a critique of the culture of recovery and normalization that positioned these as non-negotiable ends. The novel, then, is an ode to, and an embrace of, all slowness, interdependence, and social fragility as lived experiences that push against the ableist imaginaries of social efficiency and self-sufficiency. In this sense, Coetzee puts forth the notion that the audience's idea of autonomy can, and must, be there, and incorporeally. The novel reflects the tenets of the social model of disability by demonstrating the disabling aspect of an impairment is not the body, but rather the dominant social narratives, or in this case, the prevailing culture. Paul's difference is emphasized due to the societal expectation of productivity and individualism. This aligns with Michael Oliver's remark that is not the

impairment that is disabling, but rather the unresponsive world surrounding the diverse body configurations (11). In its focus on the body, and the body's, and the narrative authority's, *Slow Man*, presents, among other things, the negative construction of disability as ethical and relational, and positive. The novel's ability to invite readers to consider autonomy as encompassing, along with care, dependency, and contingency, is a contribution to the advancement of contemporary literature and the field of Disability Studies.

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