

Christy Brown's Depiction of Disability in *My Left Foot*
and *Down All The Days*

A Critical Discourse Analysis

By Bryan Collins

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Signed Bryan Collins

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I wrote and wrote without pause without consciousness of my surroundings hour after hour.

I felt a different person...I could think, I could live, I could create...

- Christy Brown on writing (MYF, 175).

Abstract

The field of disability studies contains relatively little information about Christy Brown's literary contributions. A critical discourse analysis of his autobiography *My Left Foot* (1954), and his semi-autobiographical novel *Down All The Days* (1970), reveals the ways in which one of twentieth century Ireland's greatest authors engaged with his experience of disability. In these works, Brown shows how he lives with the stigma of disability and how he is oppressed because of this disability. Brown also describes how Irish society views him as unable to meet its perception of able-bodiedness and his depiction demonstrates a shifting perception of normalcy. Although Brown questions his obvious natural talents, his resilience and his maturity as a writer enables him to fight for a degree of personal and professional success. Ultimately through the act of writing, Brown transcends his disability and he deepens our understanding of the human condition.

Summary Sheet

The field of disability studies contains relatively little information about the contributions of Irish author, Christy Brown. This is why this thesis used the method of critical discourse analysis to analyse his autobiography *My Left Foot* (1954) and his semi-autobiographical novel *Down All the Days* (1970). Brown writes in the former about growing up with cerebral palsy, in mid-twentieth century Ireland. In the latter, he depicts this society, mostly through the viewpoint of the semi-fictional Brown family and through a nameless, mute alter ego.

This thesis broke the analysis of Brown's works into three parts. The first aspect involved examining Brown's works for the concept of oppression. The second involved examining these works for the concept of able-bodiedness and normalcy and the third examined his works for the stigma of disability. These three concepts inform disability theory today and Brown addresses these concepts, either implicitly or explicitly, in both works.

The chapters dealing with each of these concepts drew on specific topics or themes addressed by Brown. In summary these themes were: sexuality; depression; death; communication; education; medical treatments; family; mobility; dreams; literature and the arts; violence and alcoholism. Ultimately, this thesis found Brown experienced various forms of oppression because of his disability, being denied an education for example. He also had to live with the stigma of cerebral palsy and this greatly affected his confidence and his personal identity. This thesis also found that Brown's perception of able-bodiedness and normalcy evolved as he matured as a man and as a writer. Today, Brown's works are relevant for disability scholars concerned with the arts and are essential reading for anyone who enjoys great Irish literature.

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For my family

List of Abbreviations

(CRPD): This refers to the 2006 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

(DAD): This refers to the Vintage edition of Christy Brown's *Down All The Days*, which was published in 1999 (as listed in the bibliography). This novel was first published in 1970.

(MYF): This refers to the 1998 Vintage edition of Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* (as cited in the bibliography). This autobiography was first published in 1954.

(UPIAS): This refers to the United Kingdom based *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation*, which was formed in 1975.

List of Key Characters

My Left Foot

The Brown Family

Bridget Brown: Christy's Mother.

Christy Brown: the author.

Francis Brown: Christy's brother and the person who transcribed some early chapters of *My Left Foot*.

Lily Brown: Christy's Sister. She marries and has three children.

Patrick Brown: Christy's Father.

Others

Dr Robert Collis: Christy's doctor, friend and his first literary mentor.

Jenny: Christy's love interest and local neighbour.

Katriona Maguire: Christy's carer and love interest.

Down All the Days

The Brown Family:

The protagonist: the nameless, alter ego of the Christy Brown.

Father/Pat/Patrick Brown: the protagonist's father.

Mother/Bridget Brown: the protagonist's mother.

Jem Brown: the protagonist's brother. He takes a picture box of a naked woman, from the protagonist.

Pete Brown: the protagonist's brother. He punches Charley after Charley suggests the protagonist is a cripple.

Lil Brown: the protagonist's sister, whose twin babies die tragically.

Others:

Charley: a neighbourhood boy and friend of the protagonist and his brothers.

Eli: a local bar woman, who sings to the protagonist.

Jenny: a character, which appears to be based on Jenny from *My Left Foot*.

Maureen: A neighbourhood girl who makes a sexual advance on the protagonist.

Nedser: Maureen's brother. He dies in a drowning accident.

Red Magso: A recent widow and friend of the Brown family.

The Soldier: a friend of Patrick Brown, who visits him in hospital.

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An Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to critically analyse Christy Brown's depiction of disability in his autobiography *My Left Foot*, which was first published in 1952, and in his semi-autobiographical novel *Down All the Days*, which was first published in 1970. The concepts of oppression, stigma, able-bodiedness and normalcy inform modern disability theory and they constitute the basis of this analysis. This introduction outlines the background to this thesis and it explains who Christy Brown is. Chapter One reviews the literature concerned with Brown and it also discusses, briefly, the biopic *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989).

Chapter Two justifies Brown as a topic of study, it describes the methodology of this thesis and it explains why disability is such a hard concept to define. This chapter also explains the concept of able-bodiedness and how it relates to the hegemony of normalcy as described by Lennard Davis (2010). It discusses the stigma of disability as first put forward by Erving Goffman (1986). It also explains the concept of oppression, as described by Paulo Freire (1970) and Paul Abberley (1989). Then this chapter presents the argument that these three concepts underpin Brown's discourse of disability, in *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*, and it outlines how these concepts relate to the themes Brown writes about in these works.

Chapter Three discusses Brown's depiction of disability and how this connects to oppression. Chapter Four explores Brown's treatment of living with the stigma of cerebral palsy. It also explores Brown's explanation of how he often played the role of an observer rather than a participant in society. Chapter Five discusses Brown's conception of normalcy and his depiction of able-bodiedness. It also discusses at length the character of Patrick Brown from *Down All the*

Days. The conclusion of this thesis summarises the conclusions of the previous chapters and it explains the significance of this study.

Who Was Christy Brown?

Christy Brown was born on June 5th 1932, in the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin, into a working class family of 22 children. His mother Bridget experienced complications while Christy was being born and when Christy was four months old, she observed he was unable to support his head. According to Christy, Bridget concluded “there was something wrong with me” and several years later he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy (MYF, 9).

Cerebral is Latin for a part of the brain while palsy refers to paralysis, although Brown’s biographer Christina Hambleton explains that doctors in 1930s Ireland considered cerebral palsy a difficult condition to understand (2007: 22). Brown’s form of cerebral palsy affected his movement and posture and his doctors and extended family recommended Bridget place him in care. She decided to raise Christy at home.

At five years of age Brown attempted to draw the letter ‘A’ by grasping a piece of chalk with his left foot and his mother subsequently encouraged Brown to write and paint in this fashion. His first glimpse of fame came in 1944 when he won a painting competition for children run by the *Sunday Independent*. The paper ran a story about Brown, featuring a picture of him painting with his left foot. As a young man Brown attended Ireland’s first cerebral palsy clinic, in Dublin. Although this clinic was of great benefit to Brown, he spent much of his life using a wheelchair and he depended on others for physical assistance with daily tasks, such as preparing food and attending to bodily functions. He lived with his parents and siblings in his family home in Kimmage, until he married his carer Mary Carr, in 1972. After he married, he moved to Kerry

and then to England. He struggled with alcoholism and depression for much of his life and he died in Somerset in England in 1981, after choking on a dinner. He is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, in Dublin.

Brown wrote and named his famous autobiography after his method of writing and painting. In *My Left Foot*, he reflects on growing up with cerebral palsy in mid-twentieth century Ireland. The book was an international success and in 1989, Jim Sheridan turned it into an Oscar winning film of the same name. In 1970, Brown published *Down All the Days*. This semi-autobiographical novel is told from the viewpoint of a mute, nameless teenager who has a disability similar to Brown's. A lyrical and a dense novel, it shocked Brown's friends and family for its portrayal of sex, disability, violence and alcoholism. It was a critical success. Brown went on to publish *A Shadow On Summer* in 1974; *Wild Grow the Lilies* in 1976 and a posthumously published work *A Promising Career* in 1982. He also penned several collections of poems; some relatively unsuccessful plays and he produced numerous paintings, for the Disabled Artists Association.

Brown emerged as a writer during a time when Irish society held deeply conservative values about the suitability of certain publications. Historian Dermot Keogh describes how Archbishop McQuaid wrote to Taoiseach Eamon de Valera to thank him for enacting measures designed to prevent the "diffusion of evil books", as well as works the Catholic Church objected to on moral grounds (1994: 221). This letter was written in 1953, just one year before *My Left Foot* was published. The chronology of Brown's life is also significant from a disability studies perspective. For most of Brown's lifetime, any consideration of what it meant to be disabled was framed under the medical model of disability. This model considers disability as a physical or mental condition of the individual, which requires a cure (Williams, 2001).

Throughout the 1960s and 70s there was a significant shift from locating disability within a person's body towards considering society at fault for disabling an individual. This came to fruition in 1975 when the UK-based Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) framed the social model of disability. This model considers disability as a condition imposed on top of a person's impairment by society. It also regards people with disabilities as an oppressed group in society.

The next chapter explains the aim of this thesis in detail, and it justifies *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days* as topics of study.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature surrounding Christy Brown's *Down All the Days* and *My Left Foot* and it places these works in a literary and academic context. The first half of this review discusses the two published biographies about Brown, as they inform much of this thesis. It also discusses Jim Sheridan's film *My Left Foot* (1989), a biopic that is based on Brown's autobiography and is considered a high mark of Irish cinema. Then this chapter reviews other academic works as well as pieces of literature that represent disability.

The second half of this review explains why the 2006 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) represents the best explanation of disability today. It also examines competing definitions and models of disability. Then this chapter reviews the literature surrounding the concepts of able-bodiedness and normalcy, stigma, and oppression. These three concepts inform modern disability theory and this thesis uses these concepts to critically analyse the themes Brown addresses, in *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*.

Biographies

There are two biographies about Christy Brown. Anthony Jordan's *Christy Brown's Women* contains lengthy extracts from letters written by Brown, which put his works in context (1998). For example, Jordan includes a letter in which Brown explains his inspirations to Katriona Maguire (a romantic interest and one of his carers).

I do not see why a physical disability should preclude any romance in one's life...without this romantic streak, I would be even duller and less original than I am (1998: 5).

Although these extracts provide an insight into Brown's personality, Jordan's biography cannot be considered a comprehensive assessment of Brown's works because Jordan places an undue emphasis on Brown's romantic life. Jordan also dedicates a significant amount of his book to the life of Dr Robert Collis, who founded Cerebral Palsy Ireland. In other words, this text lacks the focus of a comprehensive biography.

Christina Hambleton's *Christy Brown: The Life that Inspired My Left Foot* is a more accomplished work, in which the author deals with the entirety of Brown's life, not just his romantic life. This official biography includes interviews with Brown's family, friends and contemporaries, alongside extracts from Brown's works and his letters. In a rather rounded conclusion, Hambleton writes Brown is an "individualist, a democratic thinker, anti-Church, sexual and open-minded" (2007: 222). Hambleton's work represents the most comprehensive and up to date source of information about Christy Brown. Hambleton is deferential to her subject, however. She describes how it was "my privilege to write the life of such an extraordinary human being" and in 2004, she facilitated the installation of a memorial plaque at Brown's home in Kimmage (2007: 16). She is aligned with her subject and his family. Her biography cannot be considered an impartial or definitive assessment of Brown's contributions (of which there is none) and it is best read as an informative companion.

A Memoir

Brown's autobiography *My Left Foot* is his most commercially successful work. The 22-year-old author became famous in Ireland and abroad, after it was first published in 1954. Here, Brown writes about growing up in inner city Dublin with cerebral palsy, during the 1930s and 1940s. He writes about his mother Bridget teaching him to write with his left foot and about the various medical treatments he received. He also discusses his body, his experience of depression and what inspires him as an author.

Brown does not address taboo subjects in this work. For example, even though Brown considered his father as a "bastard" whom he never loved Christy says nothing negative about Patrick Brown in his memoir (Hambleton, 2007: 140). Similarly, he does not address his sexuality, even though this is a dominant theme of his subsequent novel. The sentences are relatively short and even the ending is decidedly upbeat. Brown writes

I was at peace, happy. I lay back in the chair while my old left foot beat time to the rhythm of the tune (MYF, 184).

This ending jars with subsequent events in Brown's life and with the narrative of *Down All the Days*. Later in his career, Brown expressed significant regrets about this sentimental style. Hambleton includes an interview with his friend Peter Sheridan who says, Brown "expressed an enormous distaste for *My Left Foot*". According to Sheridan, Brown regarded this work as "his immature juvenilia, decrying it as the bleating of a native cripple" (2007: 183).

Despite Brown's reservations, his memoir is a good entry point into his writings. The reader can find Brown maturing as a writer and learning to accept his disability. *My Left Foot* is also Brown's most popular work, today. For example, according to the UK store of online retailer Amazon, it

has a sales ranking of approximately 450,000 while *Down All the Days* has a sales ranking below four million. *Down All the Days* is a far more significant work.

“Dublin writ and writ large for all times”

Down All the Days is Brown’s finest literary achievement and it sold over 500,000 copies, after it was first published in 1970. He spent 16 years writing this novel and after completing it, Brown wrote to his brother Seán to say, he was “over-awed” by his achievement (Hambleton, 2007: 143-4).

This novel is a dense, lyrical work about the semi-fictional Brown family. It is set in Dublin during the 1940s. The protagonist is the author’s alter ego and he portrayed as a mute and as a nameless teenage boy with a disability, who is pushed around the streets of Dublin in a boxcar. He reflects at length on his disability and loneliness. He even considers his sexuality and witnesses the violence of his alcoholic father. The novel is also written from the point of other working class inner city characters, such as the protagonist’s father Patrick Brown (based on the author’s actual father) and the widow Red Magso. The novel concludes with the death of Patrick Brown.

Down All the Days is stylistically similar to Joyce’s works. The lengthy, rich sentences are written in the present tense and follow a stream of consciousness. This novel best demonstrates Brown’s open-minded treatment of sexuality and the individual. In almost every chapter, there is some reference to sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, religion, violence or death. For example, the protagonist experiences “painful, ecstatic, guilty” feelings about his body, he masturbates and his naked sister arouses him (DAD, 8). The novel does not end happily either, it concludes with the funeral of the protagonist’s father, Patrick Brown.

Although the novel shocked Brown's family, it was widely praised upon publication and Brown describes this praise as "a flood of euphoria." (Hambleton, 2007: 162). The *Irish Times* declared it "will surely stand beside Joyce and in front of all others as Dublin writ and writ large for all times" while the *New York Times* said, "nothing quite like this has been known in literature" (Ibid: 147). There were a few dissenting voices, however. The former director of the National Library Alf Maclochlainn called it as episodic, voyeuristic and overly reliant on expletives (Jordan 1997: 107). Brown cared little for such criticisms. When Gay Byrne, presenter of the *Late Late Show*, asked what Brown had to say to his critics, he replied "F-f-f-f-fuck him" (Ibid: 102).

Today, Maclochlainn's complaint about the novel's voyeuristic and expletive style reveals more about Maclochlainn's bias, than Brown's abilities as a writer. The praise garnered by *Down All the Days* is equally subject to the benefit of hindsight. The admiring reviewers were writing under a deadline about a work that, according to Hambleton, there was a significant amount of hype prior to publication. It can take several years to truly assess a significant work. This point is illustrated by the reaction of author John Banville, who wrote to Brown after the novel was published.

Certainly Chapter 16 is the loveliest piece of prose I have seen in a long time. I hope my enthusiasm is not making all this seem insincere; I've never written before now to any writer in praise of his work and I find it difficult to do (Hambleton, 2007: 146-7).

Banville now regards his letter to Brown as "patronising" and say *Down All the Days* is a "wonderful book — but not great" (Ibid). Despite his reservations, this novel is a gritty portrayal of disability and the taboos of mid-twentieth century Ireland. It is a testament to Brown's literary abilities and his honesty as writer. Although it was never filmed, Peter Sheridan turned it into an

unsuccessful play, in 1981. His brother Jim (a film director) tried and failed to acquire the rights before turning to *My Left Foot* in 1989.

An Oscar Winning Biopic

My Left Foot is considered a high-mark of Irish cinema. It traces Brown's disability from birth, through several adversities such as the death of his father and it concludes with the celebratory image of Brown laughing with his wife to be, Mary Carr. Daniel Day Lewis and Brenda Fricker won Oscars for Best Actor and Actress respectively in 1989, for their portrayals of Christy and his mother Bridget Brown. In 1999, the British Film Institute cited *My Left Foot* as the 52nd best British film of the twentieth century (there is no Irish equivalent of this list). Angie Errigo of *Empire* film magazine writes that Sheridan and his team

haven't flinched from depicting the unhappiness and anger in Christy's life. But their rounded impression of the man leaves one with an overwhelming sense of the miraculousness of life and of this man's spirit (2012).

Paul Darke argues this biopic should be criticised for relying on a cliché of mainstream cinema (1998). It invites the audience to feel good about themselves and about people with disabilities. Brown is portrayed as overcoming his disability, marrying his carer and ultimately receiving critical acclaim from his peers.

When in a film such as *My Left Foot*...the key character triumphs over the personal tragedy of their situation, two explicit generic themes are clear: first, that the state of abnormality is nothing other than tragic because of its medical implications; and, second, that the struggle for normality...is unquestionably right (Darke, 1998: 187).

There is some merit's in Darke's criticism. The film's happy ending is a departure from what actually happened. Hambleton describes how Brown struggled with depression, loneliness and alcoholism until his death, aged 49. This is not depicted. Darke also argues Brown is not seen as sexual in any way and he does not have children, like his peers (1998, 194). This criticism is somewhat unfair. Sheridan was confined to a text in which Brown does not explicitly discuss his sexuality. The biopic would have been discredited if Sheridan made up significant biographical details, such as Brown's children, to appease disability scholars; it is difficult to imagine Sheridan made his film with this audience in mind, in the first place. Interestingly, although the biopic includes several scenes whose *raison d'être* appears to be dramatic licence, such as Brown and his future wife Mary Carr on their first date, the film is relatively true to the book. Therefore, it is not a massive leap to criticise Brown for writing a memoir about a personal journey towards normalcy. This idea is discussed later in this thesis.

The biopic, and the book it was based, on should be considered successful because they attempt to show Brown's tragedy lay in how Irish society disabled him. The depictions of Brown being pushed around in a boxcar rather than a wheelchair raises the question: 'Where is Brown's wheelchair?' This line of questioning suggests to the viewer that disability is not always about their body or mind; it can be about someone's environment. Day Lewis felt as much because he elaborated on this idea to the now defunct *Arena* magazine, in 1989.

I saw [My Left Foot] as more than a rather grim story of a man in a wheelchair...I really wanted to try to capture the rage and frustration that led him to paint and write. To show, I suppose, that the trap is not the wheelchair or the afflictions, but our attitude to disabled people (FII, 2012).

Next, it is appropriate to place Brown's writing in a literary context.

Considering Brown Today

Although critics lauded Brown's works when they were first published, today there is almost no academic work concerned with his life or writings. This is a point Brown's official biographer makes.

No one had looked in detail at his work, no biography had been written about him and no academic papers or journals had discussed his art or literature (Hambleton, 2007: 15).

Enabling the Humanities (2002) and the *Disability Studies Reader* (2010) are good examples of what Hambleton refers to. The former is a volume of works concerned with disability and the arts; the latter is pitched as "a snapshot of a moment in a discourse" (Davis: Preface). Although both contain papers discussing the treatment of disability in works like *Moby Dick* and *Tiny Tim*, Brown is not featured. The biographies of the contributing scholars in these volumes reveal the majority originate from or are based in countries like the United Kingdom or the United States. This may go some way to explaining why these volumes overlook Brown's contributions. A search of the *Discourse and Society* journal (on November 19th, 2011) revealed nothing pertaining to Brown.

Then there is Thomas Couser's description of how memoirs concerned with disability were hard to find during the 1970s (Davis, 2010: 531-532). He goes on to explain that during the 1980s, people with disabilities began to publish a significant amount of autobiographies. Brown's works,

however, are life narratives, which were written before Couser's frame of reference. Therefore, Brown can be considered to be ahead of his contemporaries.

Mark Mossman conducts a significant examination of how the body and disability are represented in Irish literature (2009). He focuses only on works published between 1800-1922, such as James Joyce's *The Dubliners* and Christy Brown is only discussed in passing. That said Mossman makes an excellent point about the potential of disability studies to crossover into other areas.

One consistent feature in the evolution of disability studies has been the field's ability to regularly crosses over into other disciplines like queer studies, gender and performance studies, various kind of working-class and race studies, the new bio-cultural studies, and so on (2009: 1).

This crossover is evident in Brown's writings. Even though he writes about disability, he also considers the arts, the working class, the role of the mother, alcoholism, domestic abuse, and the impact of siblings on a person's life. These are the threads of Brown's books, as they were his life.

Disability and the Arts

Literature is a veritable feast for disability scholars. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder explain how a variety of works uses disability as a "crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive personality and analytical insight" in a process defined as narrative prosthesis (2010: 274-287). This claim could be labelled a generalisation but Mitchell and Snyder make a valid argument about several well-known literary works.

For example, they consider *Moby Dick*. The anti-hero Captain Ahab wears a prosthesis leg, which is made from the jawbone of a sperm whale; in other words he has an impairment. When Ishmael, the protagonist of the story, encounters Ahab for the first time he describes him in the context of this impairment.

He [Ahab] looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness (Herman Melville, 1992: 124).

Brown writes about his impairment in similar fashion, in *My Left Foot*. When describing his appearance, he writes in detail about hands that “were never still but which twisted and shook continually so that they looked more like two wriggling snakes than a pair of human hands (MYF: 50).” In this context, the image of the snakes appears to represent the powerlessness Brown felt about his disability.

Similarly, Lennard Davis considers disability within works like *Tiny Tim* and *Madame Bovary*. He argues villains of novels like these are normally scared or deformed, saying, “If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities...” (2010: 13). This argument is countered by *Down All the Days*, however. The protagonist is a central character with a disability. His descriptions of oppression and loneliness evoke sympathy rather than hostility. Therefore when compared to his contemporaries, Brown appears to be providing a relatively original perspective on disability. This idea is discussed further in Chapter Three.

Brown was not the first author to write about his impairment. Helen Keller wrote the first modern memoir about disability. She published *Helen Keller: The Story of My Life* in 1903. In this work she describes, her communication difficulties as well as her inspirations.

my failures to make myself understood were invariably followed by outbursts of passion (2005, 8).

Keller published this work aged 21, a year younger than when Brown published his memoir. The popularity of Keller's memoir makes the lack of attention paid to Brown's works all the more perplexing, particularly considering: firstly Brown originates from a country famed internationally for the quality of its literary output and secondly Brown's literary peers, like Brendan Behan and Patrick Kavanagh, are highly regarded around the world today. This thesis can attempt to address this deficit and it can do so from an Irish perspective.

Christopher Nolan is Brown's most significant, modern, Irish contemporary. The Whitbread award-winning author also had cerebral palsy, he wrote poetry and he based his novel *Under the Eye of the Clock* (1987) on his life. The work is thematically similar to *Down All the Days* and Nolan even writes about the appearance of people with disabilities in a similar manner to Brown.

Century upon century saw crass crippled man dashed, branded and treated as dross in a world offended by their appearance (1987: 3).

Like Brown describing his hands, Nolan is suggesting people can perceive the appearance of people with disabilities in a negative sense to be "cripples". Tragically, Nolan's death echoed Brown's. He died choking on a piece of food in 2009. Aged 43, he was six years younger than Brown, when he died in similar circumstances.

Next, it is appropriate to review the various attempts at defining disability.

Defining Disability

Today, Ireland is one of 147 signatories of the United Nations CRPD (2006). This does not explicitly define disability. Instead the Preamble recognises disability as an “evolving concept”. Most relevant is Article One, which outlines who people with disabilities are and, by extension, who people like Brown were.

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (2006).

The omission of a definition of disability in the CRPD is deliberate. Disability is a difficult concept to define. Barbara Altman writes that lawmakers, scholars and activists over the years have attempted various definitions of disability, consisting of “simple statements, theoretical models, classification schemes and even through different forms of measurement” (2001: 97).

The United States is a good example of a country that, as “the undisputed leader in the civil rights approach”, has tried to define disability, through legislation (Bickenbach and Chatterji 1999: 1180). Examples include the *United States Rehabilitation Act* (1973) and the *Americans With Disabilities Act* (1990). These laws were designed to prevent discrimination, to secure welfare entitlements and to enshrine the civil rights of a disparate group, ranging from returning Vietnam War veterans to those with autism.

Christy Brown was not a war veteran and Ireland did not enshrine the rights of people with disabilities, while he was alive. Brown did, however, live to see the World Health Organisation publish its definition of disability, in 1980.

A handicap is a disadvantage for a given individual resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, and social and cultural factors) for that individual (1980).

This type of definition focuses on the individual. It is considered out-dated today because it falls under the medical model of disability. Gareth Williams describes how this model operates.

The biological reality is taken to be the foundation of all forms of illness and impairment, whether “mental” or “physical” (2001: 125).

Disability scholars have roundly criticised this model (and by extension the WHO definition of 1980) for its emphasis on the individual. For example, Bickenbach and Chatterji argue the medical model ignores the role of society.

does not clearly acknowledge that the presence of social barriers and the absence of social facilitators play any sort of role in the creations of the disadvantages that a person with a disability experiences (1999: 1175).

These “social facilitators” were first addressed in 1975, by a UK-based organisation of people with disabilities. Known as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), they articulated the social model of disability.

Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society (3-4).

This model has also been criticised. Tom Shakespeare argues this model is so strongly geared towards affecting social or political change, that it downplays the degree to which impairments form part of disabled people's lives. He also makes the point that medical treatments can benefit someone with an impairment at certain stages in their lives (2010: 269-270).

Irving Zola's universal model of disability addresses some of the problems with the social model of disability (1989). Zola calls for society to implement

universal policies that recognise that the entire population is 'at risk' for the concomitants of chronic illness and disability (1).

For example, universalism considers how poorly designed buildings can be disabling and it also makes allowances for the biomedical needs of all people throughout their lives. This model was only put forward after Brown's death and some of the changes it advocates are regarded as prohibitively expensive.

A review of the literature shows there is no one inherently correct model or definition of disability. It is enough to recognise: under the medical model of disability, Brown was disabled because he had cerebral palsy; under the social model, disability was imposed on top of his impairment by Irish society; and under the universal model, Irish society disabled all of its citizens because it failed to accommodate their evolving needs.

From here, it is possible to review the three concepts of disability theory, which relate to Brown's depiction of disability. These concepts are able-bodiedness and normalcy, stigma and oppression.

Key Concepts

Sociologist Erving Goffman explains how the concept of stigma is part of the experience of disability. He uses cerebral palsy as an example to describe how dominant individuals or groups brand and mark others in order to make them appear different and separate (1986: 124). Although Goffman's work is informative, it predates the social model of disability put forward by UPIAS and he uses terms that by today's standards are considered antiquated. For example he refers repeatedly to the "physically handicapped" (1986: 19, 22, 52). Coleman L. Brown helpfully updates aspects Goffman's arguments, however.

stigmatisation occurs only when the social control component is imposed, or when the undesired differentness leads to some restriction in physical and social movements and access to opportunities that allow an individual to develop his or her potential (Davis, 2010: 189).

Brown's depiction of how he used a boxcar is one example of these social controls. As is discussed in Chapter Four, after this boxcar broke Brown spent a significant amount of time indoors and he began to experience depression. Brown achieved his potential in spite of these social controls, however. He had the support of a mother who was determined to raise and care for him herself. He also achieved in life because he encountered individuals who recognised his potential, such as his doctor Robert Collis.

The concept of able-bodiedness also underpins Brown's works. There are numerous dictionary definitions of this concept. For example, *Merriam-Webster* defines able-bodied as "having a sound strong body" (2012). The problem with definitions like these is they assume there is a mental or physical state of normalcy, which everyone should aspire to and that any derivation from this state is abnormal (Robert McRuer, 2010). Instead, able-bodiedness should be considered a transitory rather than a permanent state of being for an individual. This is a point that McRuer makes.

Everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are "intrinsically impossible to embody" fully, and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough (2010: 388).

Paul Abberley links able-bodiedness with oppression (1987). He argues the body can become a site of oppression for people with disabilities. For example, medical treatments designed to cure impairments can disable and harm an individual, rather than enable and support them. This is why the medical model of disability is regularly criticised. This is also something Brown experienced when his doctors asked him to stop using his left foot to write and paint (see Chapter Three). Mike Oliver also explains how people with disabilities can be oppressed. He points out capitalist societies use various economic reasons to exclude disabled people from full participation in society (1990). There is evidence of this in Brown's life; he writes in *My Left Foot* about being denied an education by the Irish state because of his disability.

Paulo Freire best explains how the oppressed can be liberated. He writes

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors (1970: 53).

As this thesis will show, Brown learned not to regard himself as unfortunate. Freire, however, has his critics. Paul Gibson argues Freire became “against his mild protests, became an icon, idolised by dramatically different sectors of education, business, and liberation movements” (2007: 1) while Peter McLaren put it to Freire

You universalise oppression without appreciating the multiplicity of oppressive experiences that characterised the lived histories of individuals (1993: 172).

Arguably, McLaren’s criticisms of Freire are just. Zola’s universal model of disability also represents an attempt to universalise the human condition. Similarly, authors of great literature sometimes articulate the universal as a character. For example, Herman Melville depicts how an obsession can lead to someone’s destruction. In this novel, the character Captain Ahab is driven by a desire to kill Moby Dick. He takes risks with his ship and crew to find the whale and this ultimately leads to Ahab’s death. Similarly, Brown uses the character of Patrick Brown to make a similar point about how the universal experience of disability and how anyone can be become disabled, if they live long enough. Chapter Five expands on this argument.

Conclusion

Christy Brown was an accomplished writer who wrote at length about his disability. He can be compared favourably with Herman Melville and Helen Keller and he influenced contemporary authors like Christopher Nolan. This makes it difficult to understand is why there are so few

texts concerned with his literary contributions. Today he is more commonly known for the biopic directed by Jim Sheridan than his works. Considering Ireland's literary heritage and Brown's considerable literary talents, this stands as a grievous error.

Disability is a fluid concept which over the years has been explained by legal definitions and competing theoretical models. Although, the signatories of the CRPD agree there is no definitive definition of disability, it is possible to understand Brown's disability as a social construct. Similarly, a review of the literature shows people with disabilities live with the stigma of disability and with oppression. Society may also regard people with disabilities as unable to meet its perception of able-bodied norms. This is a core idea of this thesis.

Chapter Two: Methodology

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to critically analyse Christy Brown's depiction of disability in his autobiography *My Left Foot* and in his semi-autobiographical novel *Down All the Days*. This chapter makes the case for critical discourse analysis as a method of examination and it identifies the themes of Brown's works, which are discussed in this thesis. It also outlines the structure of this thesis by explaining how the concepts of able-bodiedness and normalcy, oppression and the stigma of disability - each of which inform modern disability theory - connect to the identified themes.

Terms of Reference

This thesis argues Brown's impairment was a physical one explained by the condition of cerebral palsy. His disability, however, was a socially constructed concept, which was imposed on top of this impairment. Peter Burke best describes difference between these concepts.

an impairment represents an individual condition which may be intellectual, physical or a loss following an accident. This is different from a disability as a social construct, a consequence of negative attitudes or physical barriers that disadvantage people considered to be disabled (2008: 24).

Brown does not make an explicit distinction between impairment and disability, in his works. In *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*, Brown uses words like "handicap", "disability", "affliction", "defect", "able-bodied" and "difference" to describe both his impairment and his disability. For example, the protagonist is a "cripple", Brown's speech impediment is a "defect" and he feels

like cerebral palsy is an “affliction” and a “queerness” (DAD, 1; MYF, 171; MYF 74). Although, Brown was not a disability scholar, his choice of language is still important and it warrants analysis. The terms he uses to describe his disability and impairment are examined in the discussion chapters of this thesis.

This thesis does not intend to use Brown’s works as a means of justifying one model or concept of disability over another. This would be fruitless for several reasons. The 2006 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) represents the best explanation of disability as a “multi-dimensional concept” (Altman, 2001: 97). Similarly, academics like Tom Shakespeare and Irving Zola have outlined why the medical model is regressive; they have explained the problems with the social model of disability; and they have outlined how society can pursue a universal model of disability. Brown certainly does not make an explicit case for a “Grand Unified Theory of Disability” in his works (Jan Grue, 2011: 21). His writings are concerned with describing his experience of disability, rather than justifying the social model of disability over the medical model of disability and so on.

Description of Analysis and Criteria for Inclusion

This thesis uses critical discourse analysis to consider Brown’s works. This method is an in-depth form of textual analysis, which, according to Brian Paltridge focuses on how language constructs and is constructed by social relationships (2007: 179). From there, this method moves to “an explanation and interpretation of the analysis” and it “deconstructs and challenges the text’s being examined” (Ibid). This method should potentially explain how Brown’s views were shaped by those he had relationships with it. It should also be able to question and critique Brown’s depiction of disability.

Paltridge suggests the first step of critical discourse analysis involves “deciding what discourse type, or genre, the text represents and to what extent and in what way the text conforms to it (or not) (2007: 185).” Brown writes in *My Left Foot*, mostly about his childhood and upbringing. He confines himself mostly to factual events and his experiences of growing up in Dublin, with a disability. Therefore, this work conforms to genre of life writing. *Down All the Days* is more difficult to categorise, as Brown interweaves factual details about his life with fictional events. The novel focuses on the personal growth of a mute protagonist who feels isolated because of his disability. This protagonist is Brown’s alter ego. Brown also depicts the republican values of men like his father, who fought in the Easter Uprising of 1916 and he even describes the dreams of his characters. The story of the protagonist - the novel’s primary thread - could be described as a bildungsroman (that is a coming of age story) with the caveat that the novel itself incorporates aspects of life writing.

Next, Paltridge recommends framing the text or considering the way “the content is presented to its audience” (2007: 187). The word count of the 266-page 1999 edition of *Down All the Days* is approximately 110,000 whereas the word count of the 184-page 1998 edition of *My Left Foot* is approximately 57,000. In the latter, Brown addresses the reader directly. He writes as a young man in his twenties about his upbringing and the process of writing his memoir. The entirety of the text is written from Brown’s point of view, each chapter has an informative title - for example Chapter IX is entitled ‘Lourdes’ and is about Brown’s pilgrimage - and the table of contents equates to a quick reference guide to the book’s sixteen chapters.

Again, it is more difficult to explain how *Down All the Days* is presented to the reader. The 28 untitled chapters are referenced only by Roman numerals. Although the protagonist is Brown’s alter ego, 11 of the 28 chapters are written from the point of view of other characters; for

example, Chapter XIII depicts the recently widowed Red Magso while Chapter XXIV depicts the protagonist's drunken father, Patrick Brown. None of these characters directly address the reader (as Brown does in *My Left Foot*). He depicts their thought processes and dreams repeatedly and often through a stream of consciousness.

The next step, according to Paltridge is to consider "what has been topicalised in each of the sentences in the text" as a means of understanding what the text is "about" (2007: 185). To achieve this, the author of this thesis read each text repeatedly to better understanding what Brown is writing about. Then the author annotated each chapter with attachable paper and highlighted various key terms and sentences. For example, Chapter I of *Down All the Days* was labelled "Sexuality" while Chapter XXVIII was labelled "Burial"; the former describes the protagonist's feelings about a picture of a naked woman while the latter depicts Patrick Brown's funeral. Similarly, the chapter of *My Left Foot* named "What Might Have Been" was labelled "Medical Treatments" because Brown describes the various medical treatments he received at a cerebral palsy clinic, in Dublin. Similarly, sections within the early chapters of *My Left Foot* were labelled "Education" because Brown writes extensively about being taught to read and write by his mother, instead of at school.

This method also revealed a fundamental difference between *Down All the Days* and *My Left Foot*. Almost every chapter of the former work contains either a scene of a sexual nature or an encounter with death. These themes are largely absent from *My Left Foot*. In summary, this method identified the following themes, in both works, as possible subjects for analysis: sexuality, depression, death, communication, education, medical treatments, family, mobility, dreams, literature and the arts, violence and alcoholism. Brown connects these themes to disability, in some way in both works, as this thesis explains. Chapters Three, Four and Five of

this thesis discusses these themes and their connection to the concepts of able-bodiedness and normalcy, stigma and oppression.

Norman Fairclough explains social and political issues typically underpin or provide context to a critical discourse analysis (2003: 205). Where possible, this thesis provides a context to the identified themes. For example, the theme of education is put in context by referring to the Irish State's education policy during Brown's lifetime. Although context is crucial, this thesis is less attentive to describing everything that actually happened to Brown. Similarly, this thesis is not an attempt at historical research or a definitive analysis of Brown's texts. There are already two published biographies about Brown by Anthony Jordan and Christina Hambleton and it would be less than fruitful to attempt a third. These works, however, are used as sources of information because they place Brown's works into context and reveal details not immediately apparent to the reader of Brown's works. Most significantly, they contain letters written by Brown about his works, such as the letter discussed in the previous chapter, as they explain how Brown's perceptions evolved. Next, it is appropriate to discuss how this thesis is organised.

Overall Structure

The critical discourse analysis of *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*, which is contained in this thesis, runs through three distinct chapters. Each of these chapters uses some of the aforementioned themes as subjects for discussion and it connects them to a single, key concept of modern disability theory. Although the significance of each of these concepts was discussed in the previous chapter, it is helpful to briefly outline their relevance to this thesis here.

The first of these chapters deals with the concept of oppression. Disability scholars like Mike Oliver argue the medical model of disability oppresses people with disabilities because it

considers their condition as an individual one necessitating a cure (1990). Similarly, Paul Abberley argues people with disabilities often experience oppression because of how their body is perceived: “For disabled people the body is the site of oppression, both in form, and in what is done with it” (1987: 14).

Brown writes at length about his medical treatments and his experiences of oppression. In *My Left Foot*, Brown writes about why his doctors told him to stop using his left foot as method of communication, and he describes the negative implications this had for him. Similarly, the protagonist of *Down All the Days* is subjected to medical treatments, which he does not appear to consent to, and which subsequently cause him great distress (DAD, 34-38). These are just two examples of how Brown represents disability as an oppressive category, which relates to the human body. Chapter Three of this thesis expands on this argument and it discusses the link between this concept and Brown’s depiction of disability.

Noted sociologist, Erving Goffman examples people with cerebral palsy, in his landmark work on stigma, as a group who may be regarded as discredited by society, because they possess characteristics perceived as blemishes of character (1986: 1-2). There is ample evidence that Brown and the protagonist of *Down All the Days* are stigmatised because of their disability. For example, in *My Left Foot* Brown contrasts how his able-bodied peers pity him to how people with disabilities view him as an equal (he meets these people in Lourdes and in a cerebral palsy clinic). Brown goes to great lengths, in both works, to describe the boxcar he travels in, and the reactions others have to this and other visual identifiers of his disability. Similarly, in *Down All the Days* there are several scenes where the protagonist expresses his sexuality and is met by ignorance, scorn or derision by his siblings and peers, because he has a disability. This suggests the stigma of disability is a concept that explains Brown’s discourse of disability. Chapter Four discusses this argument further.

Robert McRuer argues able-bodiedness is a temporary category, in that if someone lives long enough they may experience some form of disability, through illness, old age or unforeseen circumstances (2010: 383-385). This point can be applied to the manner in which Brown addresses the human body. For example, the protagonist describes the process of puberty in detail, and he thinks with “affectionate pity of the doomed denizens of his own body” (DAD: 103). Similarly, in his autobiography, Brown describes his facial mannerisms and how cerebral palsy affected his movement. He then writes about how therapy enables him to play his part “in the world along with the able-bodied” (MYF: 139-14). This all suggests even those readers who considers themselves able-bodied, may experience some of what Brown depicts, at some stage in their lives. Chapter Five explores the prevalence of this concept and Brown’s understanding of able-bodiedness, in detail.

Richard Abcarian and Marvin Klotz wisely caution analysing literature is not like analysing “a chemical compound” which can be broken down (1986: 1355). The intention behind making a connection between three concepts of modern disability theory and the variety of identified themes in Brown’s works was to find a means of conducting a focused, concise critical analysis rather than a meandering one, which skims over some 160,000 words. Where possible, the extracts discussed in this thesis are connected to the overall text, to each other or to the arguments of other disability scholars. In other words, the critical discourse analysis of this thesis is geared towards reaching a “deeper understanding” of *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days* (Paltridge: 186).

Conclusion

The method of critical discourse analysis is best served for an examination of Christy Brown's depiction of disability in *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*. This method has genuine potential to deliver an original analysis and it is a powerful tool for any disability scholar concerned with the arts. The author of this thesis identified a number of themes in these works, such as death and sexuality, to facilitate this analysis. These themes connect to three significant concepts of modern disability theory. These concepts are able-bodiedness and normalcy, oppression and the stigma of disability. The relationship between Brown's work and each of these concepts is discussed in subsequent, separate chapters. The next chapter applies the first of these concepts – oppression - to an analysis of Brown's works.

Chapter Three: The Oppression of Christy Brown

Introduction

Paul Abberley argues disability is a form of social oppression, which can manifest itself in a number of ways (1987). For example, people with disabilities can be prevented from joining the workplace, they can be denied an education and they can undergo medical treatments, which agitate rather than relieve their disability. In *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days* Brown reveals his experience of oppression by describing experiences like being asked to stop using his left foot by his doctors, even though Brown's foot was his primary communication tool.

This chapter also draws on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this seminal work, Freire argues the oppressed are engaged in a continual struggle for their freedom. He describes how the oppressed must decide between "human solidarity or alienation", between "being spectators or actors" and between "speaking out or being silent" (1970: 48). They must decide if they want a way to "transform the world" (Ibid). Although Freire refers to a more general context, his point can be applied Brown's depiction of disability.

This chapter shows how Brown was torn between the solidarity of his family and between feeling alienated because of his disability. He wrote as a spectator of society and in doing so he became a participant in that society. He used his writings to speak out and what happened next transformed his world.

Brown's Experience of Education

Paul Abberley describes four criteria that must be met if a person with a disability is to be considered socially oppressed. Abberley's four criteria apply particularly to Brown's depiction of

his education. Firstly, Abberley explains how people with disabilities can become inferior to others in society.

disabled people can be regarded as a group whose members are in an inferior position to other members of society because they are disabled people (1987: 7).

This applies to the education (or the lack thereof) Brown received from the Irish state; Brown describes in *My Left Foot* how his siblings went to school while he sat alone in his bedroom for hours (MYF, 68). His experience was not unique. Brown grew up during a period when most Irish children were educated in schools run by the Catholic Church. It would have been unheard of for children with disabilities to attend these schools, where conditions were, according to historian Diarmaid Ferriter, “appalling” (2004: 430). Those without an education are at a lifelong disadvantage to those who receive one, and even more so if they have a disability. For example, the chances of a person with a disability acquiring a job are diminished even further if they are illiterate.

Secondly, Abberley explains the connection between the oppressed and the ideology of the society they live in.

these disadvantages are dialectically related to an ideology or group of ideologies which justify and perpetuate the situation (1987: 7).

Bridget Brown did not subscribe to an ideology that said her son could not be educated. She regarded education as a necessity and she foresaw it as Christy’s best real chance at accomplishing something in life. Brown describes her influence on him in *My Left Foot*. He

explains how one of his first written words was mother, as well as how she taught him to write with his left foot.

She [Bridget] thought only of the material drawback it [a lack of education] would mean to me when I got older. She wanted above all to make me equal with my sisters and brothers in every way possible, and, as I could not go to school, she did all she could to lessen the consequences of that disadvantage herself (MYF, 23).

Thirdly, Abberley explains there must be “some beneficiary” of the oppression of people with disabilities. The Irish state saved a significant amount of money by excluding children like Brown from the system. This policy also benefitted those who received an education, as they would have had less competition when it came to acquiring employment. The exclusion of children with disabilities also strengthened the position of those in power who held the idea that disability is a personal deficit, as these children would have found it more difficult to articulate their position later in life. Brown, however, was an exception in that he explains his struggle to read and write eloquently in *My Left Foot*, despite being denied an education.

In what represents a form of social oppression, Brown was unable to share in his peers’ schoolyard experiences and he became isolated from them as a result. He writes, “I lived *with* the others but at the same time I lived *apart* from them” (MYF, 69). Brown goes on to say he came “live within myself” away from the “ordinary life of a boy, the life of the streets and back alleys” (Ibid). As an adult, his exclusion from the education system even had a negative effect on his confidence as a writer.

My dreams were too big to come true. How could I write a book - I, who had been shut up all my life behind the four walls of my home and who had never as much as seen the inside of a school room? (MYF, 148).

Finally, Abberley explains why this kind of ideology is flawed.

such disadvantages and their supporting ideologies are neither natural nor inevitable (1987: 7).

Bridget Brown's conviction on education was very much at odds with policy makers and educators of her time. Even Brown's literary mentor, Dr. Collis, agreed the Irish education system could not facilitate him.

"You couldn't attend a school or university in the normal way...so the next best thing is to get a private tutor for you (MYF, 170)."

The Irish state's policy of excluding those with disabilities from the education system was not inevitable. Ferriter explains how in the 1990s the parents of children with disabilities forced the state to educate their children through public interest litigation (2004: 720). Parents like Marie O'Donoghue argued successfully in the court that the 1947 Irish constitution, which was enacted during Brown's lifetime, says free primary education should be provided for *all* citizens of the state. Although Brown died long before this in 1981, he succeeded in proving his dreams were not too big in spite of an oppressive system that considered otherwise.

The Body as a Site of Oppression

Christy Brown's writings reveal a statement made by Abberley that, "for disabled people the body is the site of oppression, both in form, and in what is done with it", as a personal truth (1987: 14). His description, in *My Left Foot*, of what happens when Dr Eirene Collis, a specialist in cerebral palsy, asks him to stop using his left foot is a good example of how medical treatments can be oppressive.

She told me that, although the use of my left foot was good for me mentally since it had provided an outlet for my imprisoned mind to express myself, it was bad for me physically because the use of it imposed a great strain upon the rest of my body (MYF, 124).

Collis may have had a medical basis for this treatment plan, but her attempt to cure Brown's physical impairments overlooked how Brown communicated with his world. Her treatment plan also appeared to be entirely concerned with curing the physical aspect to Brown's disability. Her treatment plan made little allowance for the mental outlets Brown requires. This overt focus on the individual's biological make-up is a major criticism of the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Collis's treatment could be labelled oppressive because it prevented Brown from using his most valuable communication tool and it agitated rather than lessened the degree of his disability. Brown's used his left foot as a weapon; he painted and wrote with his foot and he carved himself a place in Irish society as an artist and writer. He writes without it "I would be lost, silent, powerless" (MYF, 123). It was only after deciding to ignore his doctor's advice that Brown was able to overcome his disability, through the act of writing.

Brown also describes how medical treatments can be oppressive in *Down All the Days*. Chapter VII depicts the protagonist hospitalised and depressed. Lying on a bed in pain, he feels like the

sheets are “soft linen chains holding him down” (DAD, 36). There, he remembers a wounded sparrow “writhing in the front garden” and feeling “glad when someone got a stone and put the wrecked, crippled thing out of its misery” (Ibid). This metaphor has connotations of assisted suicide and there is the suggestion that the depressed protagonist longs for someone to end his suffering because of his disability. Later a doctor arrives and performs an examination on the protagonist’s genitals, without offering an explanation or seeking consent. He simply says to the protagonist “I’m not hurting you boy” (Ibid). If anything, the protagonist feels imprisoned within the hospital. He cannot get out of his bed, he cannot question the doctor and the treatments he receives do not appear to account for his distressed mental state.

Brown’s writings suggest he agrees with those who argue that certain medical treatments can be beneficial (Shakespeare, 2010). Although the doctors distress the protagonist, a nurse helps him with urinary retention by inserting a rubber tube into his urethra. At first the protagonist is “filled with terror” and “ashamed” but

the relief when it came was so enormous that he forgot everything...he felt himself being drained, emptied, and it was ecstatic (DAD, 35).

Similarly, in *My Left Foot* Brown discusses the benefits of speech therapy at length. He expresses praises for his therapists, who he believes are concerned with more than the biological facts of his impairment.

They are not just ‘medical people’ treating ‘patients’. They are a set of human beings deeply and sincerely interested in the plight of another set of human beings faced with many huge problems, problems which cannot merely be summarised under the heading ‘physical’ (MYF, 156).

Brown connects these "huge problems" to his disability. For example, Brown describes travelling around in a boxcar because his family cannot afford a wheelchair. Mobility is an issue that affects people with cerebral palsy, as some may need a wheelchair to travel independently. A society that does not provide this necessary tool to people with impairments is not enabling all of its citizens. As a result of having to use a boxcar, Brown became lonely, depressed and isolated and he experienced new set of problems, which cannot be described as physical. Next, it is appropriate to discuss Brown's struggle against oppression.

A Struggle for Freedom

Brown's works reveal the extent to which he was engaged in struggle against an oppressive society. His education was protracted, he had to fight to use his left foot and he struggled to establish his identity as a writer, a painter and a valuable member of Irish society. Brown's articulation of these topics represents part of his struggle for humanisation and proof he understood that

They [the oppressed] must realise that they are fighting not merely for freedom from hunger, but for... 'freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture.'

(Fromme in Freire, 1970: 68)

Freire also argues those who are engaged in a struggle against oppression must make steps "little by little" and "take forms of rebellious action" (1970, 64). These steps are documented in Brown's work. In *My Left Foot*, Brown remembers how proud his mother was when the *Sunday Independent* featured a picture of him, as child, painting; "My left foot and I had done it again" (MYF, 67). Further on, Brown expresses resentment when visitors ask him to demonstrate his

method of painting (MYF, 83). Their misplaced curiosity about his body makes him feel like “a performing monkey or a seal” that has no prospects other “than being the cripple who painted with his toes” (MYF, 83). In effect, these visitors were representative of a society, which oppressed people with disabilities and regarded them as curiosities.

Later in life, Brown dismissed his autobiography as the “bleating of a native cripple” (Hambleton, 2007: 183). Brown did not regret *Down All the Days*. This novel represents the culmination of his rebellious actions and its critical and commercial success allowed him to make the break from being regarded a writer with a disability to simply being regarded for his writing. He uses the most powerful weapon at his disposal - literary craftsmanship - to express outrage about how those with disabilities are treated. Brown directs some of this anger at the protagonist’s violent, alcoholic father Patrick. In this passage the protagonist remembers

That terrifying day when, goaded into brief reckless action by the insensitive badgering of the household, he had faced with echoing venom the strident wild-eyed figure [Pat] and had shouted back his own helpless bitterness (DAD, 264).

This anger and bitterness is a departure from *My Left Foot* and according to Hambleton “the raw wild world of the novel” shocked those who knew him (2007: 149). This is understandable. The novel is semi-autobiographical and it suggests Patrick Brown, Christy’s father, as someone who beat Bridget and oppressed Christy. This portrayal would have undoubtedly caused embarrassment for the Brown family, even if it did add to Christy Brown’s status as literary writer who brought honesty to his craft.

Ferriter cites a study by religious sociologist Alexander Humphreys which concluded there was widespread belief in Irish society that sex was “somehow evil” during the mid-twentieth century

(2004: 519). This may explain the reaction to *Down All the Days*. It is a text with the potential to undermine the status quo and turn stereotypical perceptions of people with disabilities on its head. As previously discussed, there are numerous sections in *Down All the Days* where the protagonist - and by extension Christy Brown - describes his erections and his sexual desires. The protagonist experiences confusion, guilt and loneliness over having to suppress his sexuality. This is depicted in two separate dream sequences.

During the first, the protagonist has a nightmare about failing to confess to a priest that he masturbates. The protagonist even dreams of little devil figures taunting him while dragging him towards a furnace.

How many times did you lie on the bed and do it to yourself?

How many times did you look up the girl's clothes while they swung around the lamp-post or played hopscotch? (DAD, 60)

After a second similar dream, the protagonist awakes to his disgusted brother who declares, "the bugger was having a wet dream" (DAD, 233). Arguably, the protagonist's teenage brothers may have felt guilty about their sexuality too. The protagonist's brothers are at least able to express their sexuality. In Chapter I, they exchange pictures of naked women and in Chapter XX they openly discuss a neighbourhood girl they have had sexual encounters with (DAD, 1: DAD, 33). When the protagonist experiences an erection or lusts after a woman he must conceal his desires. When the protagonist looks at pictures of a naked woman, his horrified brother Jem snaps them out of his hand (DAD, 1-2).

In this novel, Brown uses alternate viewpoints to depict how people with and without disabilities experience oppression. Abberley explains why this is an important point to make.

The oppression of disabled people in part involves pointing to the essential differences between their lives and those of other sections of society, including those who are, in other ways, oppressed (1987: 7).

The protagonist's mother Bridget and his sister Lil represent one example of this essential difference. They are portrayed as oppressed by poverty, circumstance and by a society that regarded them as second-class citizens, because of their gender. Patrick beats the protagonist's mother Bridget regularly while Lil leaves home only to marry a man like her father. When Bridget asks Lil if her husband is violent, she replies, "You know what men are. Just big children." (DAD, 184). Later, Lil's nine month old twin babies die because of the "filth and disease" of a Dublin Corporation flat and after the funeral of Lil's twins, the barman declares "It's the women who suffer when all is said and done" (DAD, 228-229). The suffering of the women of *Down All the Days* is acknowledged and they are united by gender. They are at least able to speak openly about their experiences. The protagonist, however, is unable to speak about his experience of oppression or empathise with anyone. For much of the novel, he is the only significant character with a disability and no one (except arguably the author) advocates on his behalf. This imposed silence is the essential difference between his experience of oppression and the experience of the other characters.

Language of Consequence

Brown uses various literary devices to describe oppression and its consequences. In the chapter of *My Left Foot* entitled "The Prison Walls" Brown likens his body to a prison where he is "trapped and chained" and from which he longs to "break loose and escape" (MYF, 88-89). He writes about feeling depressed and suicidal and how as a teenager "in a fit of despair" he decided

to “do away with myself” by jumping out the bedroom window (MYF, 80-81). He fears he will never experience love, marriage and family because of his impairment and after watching his sister give birth to three children he considers his future as yawning before him “like a black pit” (MYF, 89). Brown returns again and again to the idea of escaping and breaking free and his daily life reads like a continual struggle against disability. This kind of writing could be attacked as maudlin and more concerned with the angst of a teenager rather than the effects of oppression; after all Brown is reflecting on how he felt growing up. Brown, however, was depressed about his disability for much of his life. Jordan includes a letter from a more mature Brown in which he describes his family life as an “old and too painful vortex of daily monotony and sameness [designed to] anaesthetise my brain” (1998: 73).

In *Down All the Days* Brown uses images and metaphors that liken disability to a prison. Chapter XV describes a christening where the Brown family drinks and celebrates at home with friends and neighbours. The conclusion reveals the protagonist upstairs, alone, with the “smell of turf and beer and human sweat...strong in his nostrils.” He even longs to join his family downstairs.

Again the sensation of being held down by chains oppressed him; the blankets felt as heavy as iron, pinning down his trembling awakening limbs, keeping him *there*, forever *there*, mute and immobile...(DAD, 100).

The protagonist crawls to the landing but when he overhears a couple he returns to his bedroom before they see him. According to Freire, a fear of freedom is common to the oppressed (1970: 46). This applies to the protagonist here. Even though he can leave his prison, he is afraid to go downstairs and join the party. He knows if he does he will have to demonstrate a level of autonomy that someone confined to his or her bed should lack. If he goes downstairs, the

protagonist may even have to challenge his parents who, as head of the household, uphold the status quo. He subsequently returns to his bedroom, suggesting his life is a sort of open prison.

In *My Left Foot* Brown contrasts his brothers playing happily on the street to his experience of sitting indoors, feeling lonely and depressed.

Now, I was seldom happy. I would sit at the window in the kitchen and gaze at my brothers and their pals as they played a football match on the road outside the house (MYF, 49).

This is similar to a scene in *Down All the Days* where Brown describes the protagonist watching his peers.

He sat at the window; dusk had fallen; the lamplight outside had a foggy glow around it; around the bottom of the post some boys played cards...on the glassy circle a group of girls played with a skipping rope (DAD, 44).

In these passages, the reader witnesses the existence of the outsider and the participant. This juxtaposition is reflective of Brown's life. He sat by his window and he observed and wrote about the society that oppressed him. He used these observations as fuel for his works. Through the act of writing, Brown created *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*. When they were published, in effect he became a participant in and a contributor to society. Again, this duality of the existence of the oppressed is a common experience of the oppressed (Freire 1970: 48). In other words, it is possible to be an observer of an oppressive society and be a participant in that society, at the same time.

Fame and success empowered Brown to transform his world. He responded by moving away from his family, with his wife, first to the west of Ireland and then to England. Although Brown's intention in leaving Dublin was to write more and drink less, he struggled to write regularly and with alcoholism. Brown's subsequent works did not achieve the same level of critical or commercial success as *Down All the Days*. His biographer Christina Hambleton includes a letter from Brown, in which he recognises his decline.

My mental and physical condition has drastically deteriorated to the point where I have become a vegetable...

I'm just not the man I used to be. I've only dim recollections of that individual, like an old friend I used to know and with whom I've lost contact (2007: 181).

Brown wrote this letter in August 1981, just two weeks before he died. Even though Brown acknowledged felt his physical and emotional decline, the circumstances of his death do not take away from the power of *Down All the Days* and *My Left Foot*.

Conclusion

In *My Left Foot*, Brown describes how the Irish state refused to educate him because his disability. He also touches on how his disability impacted his struggle to establish himself as a writer of consequence. In *Down All the Days*, Brown deftly depicts the oppressive experiences of people with and without disabilities and he also focuses on how a person with a disability can be oppressed because of their sexuality. In both works, Brown explains how medical professionals provided him treatments, which were more concerned with curing his disability than supporting his integration into society.

Brown's experience can be compared to that of protagonist at the end of the corridor, in *Down All the Days*. He regarded his disability and his day-to-day life as a prison and he was afraid of what would happen if he escaped. Ultimately, Brown walked downstairs, joined society and transformed his world but rather than finding the freedom he so desired, Brown simply slipped from one prison to another. Although the end of Brown's life appears bleak, his works represent an honest depiction of the life-long struggle of people with disabilities against oppression.

Chapter Four: Living With Stigma

Introduction

Stigma is a bodily concept that has existed in various forms since ancient Greek times and is a concept that evolved throughout history. For example, the Catholic Church associates stigma with a state of grace. Today, noted sociologist Erving Goffman best explains how the concept of stigma relates to disability theory. He explains how modern society associates conditions like cerebral palsy with "deeply discrediting" characteristics that indicate disgrace (1986: 2).

Goffman lists three types of modern stigma. The first type refers to physical abnormalities, the second refers to "blemishes" of character and the third refers to the "tribal stigma of race, nation and religion" (Ibid). People with disabilities may experience the first type because impairments like cerebral palsy can carry visual identifiers, such as facial mannerism, which signal to others the condition of the person in question. With respect to the second, society may regard conditions like mental illness, alcoholism and depression as "blemishes of individual character" (1986: 2). Goffman explains the third type of stigma in a more general context; he describes how it is possible for large swathes of the population to be stigmatised because of their race or religion (Ibid).

According to Goffman, individuals living with a stigma can be described as discredited or discreditable. A person can be described as discredited if people know the discrepancy between their actual social identity and their virtual one. For example, somebody who visits a family member in a psychiatric hospital may know about this person's psychiatric condition, even if others in society do not. On the other hand, a discreditable person is an individual who has to manage aspects of their identity and even conceal undisclosed personal information as they

move through society. For example, the psychiatric patient who is discharged may choose to conceal information about where they have been when they encounter a friend.

This chapter discusses the moments when each type of stigma occur in *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*. It also explores Brown depictions of being discredited and it draws on information written by him that reveals the differences between his actual and virtual identities.

Terms and Symbols of Stigma

Some of the words and phrases Brown uses to describe his disability could be labelled stigma terms. According to Goffman, stigma terms attach an imperfection or undesirable attribute onto the original word and are widely used in society (1986: 2). Brown's use of the word cripple is an example of this.

Cripple is an Old English word that immediately conveys to the listener that the person in question has a physical impairment. This word can also be described as offensive because it suggests a deficiency of the body or mind. Brown repeatedly uses the term cripple to describe his physical impairment in *My Left Foot*.

I couldn't reason this out. I couldn't even think clearly about it. I could only feel it, feel it deep down in the very core of me, like a thin sharp needle that worked its way through all the fancies and dreams of my childish mind till it tore them to shreds, leaving it naked and powerless to avoid the stark reality, that I was a cripple (MYF, 49-50).

Later, Brown cites this moment as when he first became conscious of “my own crippledom” (MYF, 80). In this passage, his use of the word cripple suggests he feels discredited. It is as if Brown discovered he was a “cripple” and that this term sums up his identity, entirely. He feels this was a negative experience because his consciousness of “crippledom” left him helpless and depressed.

Brown use of the word cripple in *Down All the Days* also suggests the negative connotations of this word. In Chapter I, the protagonist’s brother Jem declares about a picture of a naked woman “You can’t show them dirty pictures to a cripple!” (DAD, 2). In Chapter VII, the protagonist is accidentally hit with a rock during a street-fight causing his brothers to shout “The dirty lousy bastards - hitting a cripple!” (DAD, 33). Then in chapter XX a neighbourhood teenage girl tells the protagonist ““You’re not bad-looking, I mean, for a cripple”” (DAD, 136). In each of these examples, other people use this stigma term to describe the protagonist in a negative context. His peers hold him to a lower standard because he is a “cripple”. Similarly, the protagonist does not use this stigma term; it is forced on top of him. This suggests the term “cripple” is much like disability; it is forced on top of the protagonist by society. Brown’s use of the term “cripple” in this work also suggests this word formed a part of the daily lexicon of the Irish society he depicts.

There is a moment at the end of *My Left Foot* when Brown uses “cripple” in a different context. In this chapter, Brown depicts a reading and concert to celebrate the launch of his autobiography. Initially, he describes how a man attending this reading is engrossed in a newspaper.

Obviously he had come to enjoy a concert, not to be made to listen to a lecture on cripples. (MYF, 182)

In this context, Brown uses “cripple” to playfully poke fun at the bad manners of a guest. Brown’s doctor Robert Collis continues to read a passage from *My Left Foot*, the hall goes quiet and the audience begins to listen.

I too began to listen...I forgot my queer hands twisting and twining in my lap. I forgot my crooked mouth and shaking head...Did all that really come out of my mind? It seemed as if I was dreaming. (MYF, 182-183).

The chapter concludes with a standing ovation followed by the singer Burl Ives entertaining the crowd, and in particular his family.

Now I could relax and enjoy it completely. I was at peace, happy, I lay back in my chair while my old foot beat time to the rhythm of the tune (MYF, 184).

Here, Brown is reflecting on his success as an author. He appears more confident than the powerless teenager struggling to accept his impairment (MYF, 50). He has recaptured “cripple” and disarmed its power. Brown is not unique in this respect. Disability scholar Nancy Mairs describes why she uses the term cripple to describe her impairment.

I like the accuracy with which it [cripple] describes my condition: I have lost the full use of my limbs. "Disabled," by contrast, suggests any incapacity, physical or mental. And I certainly don't like "handicapped," which implies that I have deliberately been put at a disadvantage (1986: 1).

Like Mairs, Brown is fully in control of this stigma term. He is able to use it, as a literary author to add honesty and weight to his depiction of the society he depicts. As a man, he use this stigma term to describe his personal journey toward accepting his impairment

Down All the Days contains symbols that explain how disability is identified and stigmatised. In Chapter XIX, the protagonist observes two members of the public who are identified by these symbols. They are subsequently attacked. The protagonist watches as a man with a “crooked shortened leg and a huge surgical boot” stumbles out of a public house and is harassed and knocked to the ground by “rows of jeering boys”. There appears to be no reason for the first attack beyond the man’s physical impairment. Next, these boys “descend on a thin nervous boy with thick glasses”. In this scene, the boy’s glasses and the man’s foot symbolises their physical impairments and marks them as targets, for their attackers. This scene also serves as an example of how someone’s religion can become a discreditable characteristic, which should be concealed. Before breaking the boys glasses, the gang chants “Proddywhoody, go home!” in reference to the boy’s Protestant religion (DAD, 123-125).

Brown’s wooden boxcar, which he used to travel around in as a child, represents another symbol of stigma. In Chapter IV of *My Left Foot* Brown describes this boxcar as “my chariot” and “my throne” and he nicknames it “Henry”. He remembers being eight and how he “went about it like any royal king” and how he “tasted adventure and excitement with the others” on this boxcar. Such positive language suggests Brown’s boxcar is a source of pleasure. Brown, however, alludes to how “everybody joked about it [the boxcar]. But to me it was something loveable, almost human”. Although he does not describe these jokes he adds, “I noticed how the other kids would stare at me” (MYF, 37-38). Again, this symbol identifies Brown’s physical impairment and it marks him as different to his able-bodied peers.

In *Down All the Days* the boxcar is not associated with adventure, excitement or personal freedom. Instead, it is more explicitly linked with disability. Chapter XI depicts the protagonist waiting in his boxcar for his brothers and their friends to return.

It was freezing up on the hill, where they had parked him [the protagonist]. They never let him go underground with them... He wanted to be there [home] now, instead of sitting crouched in the boxcar in this bitter weather (DAD, 64).

Here, the protagonist is not enjoying himself or even consenting to this experience. He comes across as powerless and his boxcar suggests he lacks autonomy. This is not how the boxcar is depicted in *My Left Foot* and this suggests that Brown's feelings about his boxcar changed, as a he grew older.

Next, it is appropriate to discuss Brown's depiction of being a discredited member of society.

Discredited

In *My Left Foot*, Brown depicts how he felt discredited because of the various physical markers that identified his disability to members of society. For example, he describes his facial mannerism.

my head kept shaking and wobbling from side to side...when I'd try to smile I'd only grimace and pucker up my eyes so that my face looked like an ugly mask (MYF, 51).

Brown also describes “the saliva running down my chin at every word” and how he “slobbered and gabbled” while talking (MYF, 51). Later, he reveals how this made him feel.

It [speech] has been the one aspect of my handicap that has caused me the bitterest pain, for without speech one is practically lost, curtained off from other people, left wishing to say a million things and not able to say one (MYF, 161).

There is plenty of evidence of Brown curtaining himself off from society because of his feelings about his disability. Brown explains he had to remain indoors after his boxcar broke (MYF, 37-38). This suggests Brown understood, even as a child, that his boxcar differentiated him from his peers. A boxcar would have been an easy enough item for Brown’s family, many of who were involved in the construction trade, to replace or fix, but he does not acquire another. Brown also stopped demonstrating to visitors to the house how he used his left foot to paint and write because “it made me feel rather silly and awkward” (MYF, 83). This suggests Brown felt discredited because he knew he spoke and used his body differently to other members of society. Brown responded by remaining indoors. He created a virtual social identity whereby his visibility in society was reduced.

I hid my face whenever anybody strange passed me by, but I couldn’t help seeing how they’d glance at my face and then down at my hands nodding their heads significantly to whoever was with them (MYF, 52)

The physical markers of Brown’s impairment are significant to his public or virtual identity and they reveal how people can stigmatise disability. In the chapter entitled “A Look of Pity” Brown remembers being 14 and dreaming he was in love with a neighbourhood girl named Jenny who

regularly visits the house. One day she walks into Brown's backyard and glances at him "with a look of pity" (M YF: 73).

The bitterest of all was the realisation, that I had tricked myself into believing that my affliction didn't matter, that my 'queerness' was merely self-consciousness which nobody else took notice of (MYF, 75).

Brown is signposting this moment as the first time he understood a love interest might consider him discredited, because of his disability. This must have affected him deeply because he uses words like "queerness" and "affliction" to describe himself entirely. Brown's family, however, would not have found his facial mannerisms or method of speech disconcerting because they knew Brown intimately and they understood there was more to him than his impairment (Goffman, 1986: 51). For example, Christy describes how Bridget organised a trip to Lourdes for him after she became concerned about her son's depression. Here, Brown became aware of other people with disabilities.

I had been rather like a snail shut away in his own narrow shell and that was only now beginning to see the great crowded world that lay beyond. Not only were these people afflicted, but, to my surprise, their handicaps were actually worse than my own! (MYF, 94-95)

In Lourdes, Brown recognised the commonality of experience between him and others with disabilities. These people were less concerned with concealing themselves from society. For example, Brown describes Danny and Marie (both of whom had physical impairments). He writes that Danny's main desire was to milk his cows again while Marie's was to attend her first

dance (Ibid). Brown also describes praying to be “cured” of his disability and his struggle to re-integrate into his old routine, after returning home.

No matter how I might appear on the surface, no matter how I might pretend to others or how much I lied to myself, I would never be happy or at peace with myself as long as I was crippled like this (MYF, 101).

Brown could not hide how this pilgrimage affected him from Bridget. She identified her son’s true emotional state and she encouraged her family to build him an apartment in the back garden, where he could paint and write and “live in comfortable solitude” (MYF, 115). This was an important stage in Brown’s journey towards regarding himself as something other than discredited.

A Turning Point

Disability scholar Lerita M. Coleman Brown argues the social bond between family members counteracts stigma (Davis: 186). This was true in Christy Brown’s case. His family encouraged him to grow and to be successful. Christy Brown stands out because people outside his family encouraged him too. His doctor and friend Robert Collis read early drafts of *My Left Foot* advised Brown about this craft.

He taught me so many things in so short a time that for a few days I was rather dizzy...He would come into my little study, sit down and start talking to me about writing in a simple way without using any grand phrases or using any grand theories (MYF, 166).

In his critique of the social model of disability, Tom Shakespeare explains how medical interventions can benefit people with disabilities and Brown's experience is an example of this (2010: 269). Brown attended a cerebral palsy clinic run by Collis, in Dublin. Here he received speech and physiotherapy and he describes how his "grunt" became more comprehensible as a result of this therapy saying, "I am speaking with greater self-confidence and less self-consciousness" (MYF, 163).

In this clinic Brown no longer felt discredited because of how he looked or spoke and the point he makes about this clinic reveals how it can be regarded as normal to speak with a slur or a grunt, in certain environments.

In the Clinic, it is different. Here, we are 'among our own', so to speak. We are surrounded by people with handicaps similar to, and often worse than, our own, and we see that our old 'difference' is not so different after all (MYF, 156-157)

This lends credence to the argument that Brown was stigmatised and even discredited as he moved through society, whereas in the clinic he felt enabled. Brown's point also suggests if his family and peers could understand him, then it would have been possible for almost anyone to understand him if they made an effort. For example, today deaf and hearing students in the Gallaudet University, in the United States, routinely use American Sign Language and English to communicate with each other.

Goffman describes how people living with a stigma begin to break their habit of concealing themselves from society (1986: 1-2). They start voluntarily disclosing information about themselves. This process began for Brown when he moved into the apartment at the back of his house and wrote his autobiography.

It should be added that in the published autobiographies of stigmatised individuals, this phase in the moral career is typically described a well-adjusted one—a state of grace (Goffman, 1986: 101)

This may suggest Brown reached his moral turning point early in his career. After all, at the end of *My Left Foot*, Brown describes standing before society and laying bare his disability. This was not Brown's state of grace, however. Firstly, the able-bodied audience who attended the reading of *My Left Foot* may have applauded because they felt glad Brown was able to write an autobiography in the first place. After all, much of this autobiography is concerned with the experience of cerebral palsy and how it can be treated. Secondly, Brown was in his early twenties at this reading and he had yet to mature as writer. He had yet to write *Down All the Days*.

Blemishes of Character

Goffman describes how stigmatised individuals have to manage personal information, which maybe perceived as blemishes of character. Examples include alcoholism, mental illness and in the case of the protagonist of *Down All Days*, sexuality (1986: 2). Similarly, a stigmatised individual may employ adaptive techniques, which withdraw attention from these blemishes. This process is known as covering.

In Chapter I, the protagonist's brothers joke and pass around a picture box of a naked woman saying, "Look at the dollies on that wan! (DAD, 2). When the protagonist receives the box, his brother Jem declares, "You can't show them dirty picture to a cripple!" (Ibid). The protagonist sees the picture anyway and he becomes visibly sexually aroused, while the other boys with him

“stood about, not knowing where to look” (DAD, 9). Then the protagonist’s brother Jem takes the picture box.

he hated his brother just then, hated all those others so knowing and so capable fools who had just witnessed his shame and guilt, for they had made him feel conscious of these emotions for the first time ever, and he felt soiled and muddy. He wanted to lash out blindly and in rage (Ibid).

In this case, it is acceptable for the able-bodied boys to openly joke about a picture of a naked woman. Their sexuality is a source of bravado. The protagonist has awoken to, not only his sexuality, but the realisation that this aspect of his personality is perceived as a blemish of character. He sees that his brother regards him as a “cripple” who should not look at a picture of a naked woman and experience sexual desire. As a result, he internalises the idea that he should respond to future reference to his sexuality by covering.

This occurs in Chapter II and V. In the former, the protagonist’s brothers joke with Charlie about having sex with a girl, named Jenny. Charlie says, “Maybe she’d do it to him [the protagonist] for choice! Yeah maybe she would! On account of him being a...’ (DAD, 15). Then the protagonist’s brother Pete punches Charley. Similarly, in Chapter V, a neighbourhood girl visits the protagonist’s house. She gives him some comics and places her hand on his thigh. Then she leans forward “showing the snowy tops of her breasts” and whispers “I’m not afraid of you!” (DAD, 27-28). Although she is flirting with the protagonist, her statement suggests some people may be afraid of the protagonist because of his disability.

In both cases, the protagonist does not react. This suggests he understands if he draws any further attention to his sexuality he will be shamed. So, the protagonist continues to covers his

sexuality even though this pains him. This is evidenced in Chapter X, when the protagonist has a nightmare. While waiting outside a confession box, the protagonist fears what will happen if he confesses to the priest that he masturbates.

It was too bad, too black to tell that nice clean-shaven young priest...Besides he couldn't get the words out, he could only grunt and make twisted ugly faces. He was sure the priest would never understand either the sin or the words (DAD, 58).

Here, the protagonist is describing the link between his disability and the guilt he feels about his sexuality. He feels his sexuality is a blemish of character because of his disability.

Although the protagonist does not fully disclose his sexuality in this novel, he reaches a kind of moral turning point, after Patrick Brown dies. The protagonist attends his father's funeral and there, he wears "his first tie" from "some forgotten cranny of the house" (DAD, 248). This tie marks the protagonist as a son of Patrick Brown, who is in his grief, is no different to Jem, or the others. Some of the other mourners stigmatise this grief, because the protagonist has a disability, however.

He saw the pity, disapproval, mingled emotions in the faces of strangers, and he gritted his teeth and growled at them and felt a marvellous exultancy when they drew hastily back as if encountering some sort of tethered beast (DAD, 259).

This time, the protagonist does not care what people think He is prepared to meet their gazes and his look of anger demonstrates he will challenge anyone who questions, pities or disables him. This is not the passive protagonist depicted in previous chapters.

Conclusion

Brown's depiction in *My Left Foot* reveals he felt discredited by his disability. This depiction also reveals how stigma connects to an environment and the people in that environment. Brown does not address how it is possible to challenge the perceptions of those in society who have misconceptions about people with disabilities, however. If people with and without disabilities are explicitly segregated (as was Brown's experience in the cerebral palsy clinic he attended) then it is difficult to understand how the stigma of disability can be challenged. Similarly, this kind of segregation makes no allowances for the idea that disability is a state, which can affect anyone at any stage in their lives through illness, age or a variety of other social factors as detailed by Zola's universal model of disability (1989).

The critical acclaim Brown experienced after the publication of *Down All the Days* best represents Brown's "state of grace" (Goffman: 1986, 2). One major thread in this novel is the extent to which society stigmatises people with disabilities when they express their sexuality. This novel epitomises the pinnacle of Brown's creative talents and its critical and commercial surprised the author. Brown's state, however, was a transient one as his later works did not achieve the same level of success and he struggled with alcoholism and depression, until his death in 1981.

Chapter Five: Perceiving Able-bodiedness and Normalcy

Introduction

In 1835, French statistician Adolphe Quetelet published his landmark *Treatise on Man*. This work plots the distribution of physical features, like height and weight, in the average man or l'homme moyen. According to Lennard Davis, the society of the 19th century subsequently classified people as normal or as deviant, based on their distribution of these characteristics (2010). This industrialised society also began to use these characteristics to describe a person's able-bodiedness or their ability to meet the physical demands of employment. This explains why modern definitions of what it means to be able-bodied are confined to notions of physical health. For example, *Merriam-Webster* defines able-bodied as “having a sound strong body” while according to the *New Oxford English Dictionary* being able-bodied is to be “fit and healthy” or “not physically disabled” (2012; 2011).

The problem with these kinds of definitions is they reduce the bounty of human diversity to a bell curve. They presume a certain set of physical characteristics is normal and everything outside this set is abnormal. In other words, Christy Brown is considered abnormal because of his cerebral palsy. These restrictive definitions also presume everyone should aspire to a state of normalcy and that a derivation from this state represents a deficit or form of personal weakness (Robert McRuer in Davis, 2010: 386). In fact, the distribution of physical characteristics can change as a person ages; for example they may gain weight. Similarly, they may acquire an impairment or disability through age, injury, ill health or personal circumstances (Irving Zola, 1989: 1).

This chapter critically analyses the concept of able-bodiedness and normalcy as presented in *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*.

Method versus Result

Brown's description of how he learnt to read and write in *My Left Foot* challenges the stereotypical idea that the bodies of people with disabilities are deficient somehow. One evening when Brown was a child, he unexpectedly grasped a piece of chalk with his left foot. Under his mother's gaze he attempted to write on the kitchen floor.

Out went the foot. I shook, I sweated and strained every muscle...Everything in the room swam till the faces around me were mere patches of white. But - I drew it - *the letter 'A'* (MYF, 17).

Learning to read and write is an experience most readers of Brown's book will be familiar with. It is a normal rite of passage for a reader and it, which allows us to empathise with Brown's experience.

As a young man, Brown's doctors advised him to stop using his left foot and concentrate on developing his other limbs. Initially, Brown complied and he tried writing his autobiography by dictating sentences to his brother, Francis. He found this method unfavourable to the process of writing, however.

I thought and thought, but it was no use, the words were all wrong and twisted. I looked down at my hands, useless as ever (MYF, 174).

Brown understood his foot was his primary communication tool and when he started using it again, the benefits to his writing were almost immediate.

I wrote and wrote without pause without consciousness of my surroundings hour after hour. I felt a different person...I didn't feel frustrated or shut up anymore. I was free, I could think, I could live, I could create...(MYF, 175)

Here, the reader can picture Brown sitting in his room crafting his sentences, by working his bare left foot along his IBM typewriter - a process intimately familiar to any author. After his work was published, Brown's methods attracted interest from visiting journalists. Anthony Jordan documents the impressions of *Irish Times* journalist Des Rushie, who witnessed Brown at work.

The little toes pick out the words laboriously, vainly trying to keep pace with the composing mind, now awhirl with the words of a novel in progress...His body writes in irritation and he tosses his head with coltlike impatience - a Pegasus eager to keep abreast of the flight of thought but absurdly tethered to an inadequate little toe (2007: 112).

Brown's method would have interested readers of the *Irish Times*. Literary profiles commonly discuss how authors compose their work. For example, the *Writers' Rooms* section of *The Guardian* describes where famous writers like Virginia Wolfe worked (2012). Rushie's description of Brown may even have led a few readers of the *Irish Times* to question their own perception of able-bodiedness. The exaggerated level of interest in Brown's method rather than his creations is representative of a society where one is considered a curiosity if they use their foot instead of

their hand, however. This understandably displeased a writer who wanted to be known for his work rather than his method.

Interestingly after *My Left Foot* was published, Brown discovered Velcro while touring America. This enabled Brown to dress independently, like his peers and he had it sewn into all of his clothes. His biographer Christina Hambleton documents his feelings about this simple environmental adaptation.

In fact, I am just about self contained now and can function almost independently. This I need not tell you is a tremendous boost to my morale and has put me in great spirits (Hambleton, 2007: 99).

Brown may have ignored the advice of doctors who wanted to cure his condition but he did not regard himself as deficient somehow. He learned to accept the limits of his body and he availed of the supports around him. The result is a deeply honest account of his disability, which informs our understanding of able-bodiedness and of normalcy.

Constructing Normalcy

In Chapter V of his autobiography, Brown reflects on his appearance. He remembers being a teenager and contrasting his brother's "brown steady hands with strong, square fingers" to his own "bent, crooked fingers, hands that were never still" and he even compares his hands to "two wriggling snakes" (MYF, 50). He describes how his head kept "shaking and wobbling" as he spoke and he remembers feeling like his appearance was "grotesque" and something which caused him to smash his bedroom mirror (MYF, 51).

The disdain Brown felt towards himself connects to his initial conception of normalcy. Brown disliked how he looked because he saw visible evidence of his physical impairment and because he appeared differently to his able-bodied siblings. Although it is quite common for a teenager to be critical of their personal appearance, Brown's criticisms were amplified by how he regarded his impairment. He could not accept that he drooled and his brothers did not.

Later, Brown describes his brothers acquiring employment and moving out of the Brown family. He also discusses his sister Lily getting married and having children. He explains that watching his siblings move on with their lives made him feel like he had no direction. He writes, "I seemed everyday to be drifting further and further from the orbit of their lives" and he explains how his life felt "patternless, without purpose or worth" (MYF, 88-89). This suggests Brown's perception of a normal life involves possessing the purpose and direction of a spouse and of someone who contributes to society.

Brown subsequently describes getting older, attending a cerebral palsy clinic and undergoing speech and physiotherapy (MYF, 126). These therapies enabled him to manage aspects of his impairment easier, such as his speech and movement. Brown describes feeling like there was a difference between him and other members of society, even during this therapy however.

No matter how well I might conquer my handicap I would never be a normal individual leading a normal life. The old 'difference' would always remain. (MYF, 137).

Brown's use of the word handicap may be explained by the widespread employment of this term, during his lifetime. As discussed previously, the World Health Organisation incorporated the word handicap in its definition of disability (1980). Under the social model of disability Brown

would not have to conquer any “handicap” by himself; his disability should was a problem faced by Irish society. Similarly, Brown’s feelings about the differences between his life and the lives of others represents a construct of normalcy. There is nothing to suggest that Brown’s way of life is more or less normal than the lives of those around him.

This passage also demonstrates Brown knew his life would always be marked by cerebral palsy. It was only after he decided to use his impairment as a topic for his autobiography that he discovered he could contribute to an able-bodied society, like his siblings, through the act of writing.

I felt that I had at last found a way of scaling those walls and breaking loose from the shadow of them, a way of taking my place in the sun and of playing my part in the world along with the able-bodied (MYF, 140).

After the success of *My Left Foot*, a number of events enabled Brown to lead a life closer to his construct of normalcy. Firstly in 1956, Brown left his cerebral palsy clinic saying, “Physiotherapy has done all it can do for me” (Hambleton, 2007: 85). He concentrated on improving his writing and he even partook in numerous promotional radio and television interviews. This suggests Brown embraced writing as his best chance of creating “something splendid” from his disability (MYF, 157). His impairment did not affect his writing negatively. If anything his experience of able-bodiedness and his understanding of normalcy led to an honesty in his literary contributions. Through the act of writing, Brown could be himself.

I felt released, at peace. I could be myself sometimes anyway. And If I couldn’t know the joy of dancing, I could know the ecstasy of creating (MYF, 175).

Secondly, according to Hambleton Brown went on to earn over \$370,000 from his writings and from his work as an artist for Disabled Artists Association. He was able to use this money to provide for his family (2007: 1919); his life was not directionless. Finally, Brown found companionship through his marriage to Mary Carr, in 1972.

Although Brown achieved much of what he longed for in *My Left Foot*, it would be disingenuous to suggest the life he constructed was entirely happy. Hambleton documents his marriage as a difficult one alongside his struggle with alcoholism and depression (2007: 181). She also documents the obituary written by Brown's friend Peter Sheridan, after his death in 1981.

you perceived life faithfully. And accurately. But more than that, you lived it. You were consumed by it...You were uncontainable Christy (2007: 195).

If anything Brown's experience reveals normalcy as a fluid concept. Brown's perception of normalcy shifts throughout *My Left Foot* and it continued to shift long after it he became a successful writer. Although his life might not necessarily have been happy, there is no evidence that happiness and normalcy are mutually exclusive. Perhaps, it is enough to say Brown's life had meaning.

The Life Journey of Patrick Brown

The life journey of Patrick Brown, as depicted in *Down All the Days*, reveals the similarities between the life journey of the able-bodied and of people with disabilities. Initially, Patrick is depicted as a hardworking man who provides for his family. He also controls his family through violence and intimidation. One example of this occurs in Chapter XIII when he arrives home from the pub. Over dinner, he complains to his wife Bridget that she "saddled" him with a "litter

of bastards” and he rips her blouse in front of the children (DAD, 48-49). A terrified Bridget tells Patrick “They [his children] were all born proper in the sight of God!”. Patrick roars, “In the sight of my bloody cock, you mean!” (Ibid).

Here, Patrick is asserting his role as the able-bodied alpha male of the family by highlighting his sexuality and his physical dominance over his family. This is Patrick at his most powerful.

Later in Chapter XXIV, an older Patrick Brown wanders home from the pub drunk. His thought process reveals that he now despises his sexuality (something which he once saw as his source of power).

Every time a man poured his seed into a woman, he poured some of his heart’s blood into her as well...and each time, he got less and less, weaker and weaker...till there was just a shroud of skin hung upon a frame (DAD, 189).

Here, Patrick is aware of his age and declining health. He understands his role, as the able-bodied alpha male of the Brown family is a transient one. This forces him to consider the final stages of his life journey.

He was free of her [Bridget Brown], free of the old insatiable hunger crawling under his skin...

Free now of all that once hunted and hounded him, the woman hunger...

And now his freedom was bitter, for it had come too late (DAD, 199).

Patrick subsequently has a debilitating stroke and he spends the last few days of his life in hospital connected to “a tangle of tubes” (DAD, 243). The nuns caring for Patrick tell Bridget

he is a “good patient” and in stark contrast to the violent man depicted previously, Bridget replies her husband was “always religious in his own way” (DAD, 243). Here Patrick serves as an example of someone who acquires a disability through illness and age (Irving Zola, 1989).

When the protagonist visits, he sees his father in his pyjamas for the first time and he realises his father is a frail man rather than a figure to be feared; “the eyes were glazed, dull, denuded of any light, the mouth crooked and slack and dribbling” (DAD, 242). Then he witnesses a visiting friend known as the Soldier, pour a drink into his father’s mouth. He also witnesses his mother wiping Patrick’s brow and the medical team performing their procedures (DAD, 242-246). This moment symbolises a role reversal. The protagonist is normally the patient in the family and the one who depends on others for food and care. Now, he is the more able-bodied of the pair and is expected to support and visit his father.

After Patrick dies, the protagonist and his brothers look upon his corpse. Here, the protagonist sees death for what it is: the natural end point of a life journey.

The face seemed smaller than it had been in life...It was all so normal after all, after his reluctance and secret loathing, that he almost expected the eyes [of Patrick Brown] to open then and blaze up at him with their old fire (DAD, 247).

This moment also represents the end point of a transition from father to son; the protagonist and his siblings have become the men of the Brown household.

Patrick’s journey shows that to be considered strong, healthy and able-bodied is to occupy a transient state of being. Patrick is an example of how a disability can be acquired by anyone. His story also shows that people depend on others at various stages in their lives for support and

care. Ultimately, people with and without disabilities live in closer proximity to each other and to death than a society concerned with able-bodiedness and normalcy would like to admit. Death is the state we all acquire.

Sex and the Hawk

In *Down All the Days* Brown debunks the myth that people with physical impairments or disabilities may be unable to function sexually. He also uses the image of the hawk to depict the transient nature of able-bodiedness.

In Chapter VII, the protagonist is hospitalised for a difficulty he has urinating. While in hospital, a doctor performs an examination of his genitals. The protagonist experiences an erection, which embarrasses him and surprises the doctor.

Quite abruptly the man stopped and stared at him...a sort of sad surprise in his large liquid eyes; then he covered him up again, stood up and wrote something in his notebook, smiled vacantly at him and left (DAD, 36-37).

Later, two female nurses leer at the protagonist's erection before walking out of the room "giggling and whispering together" (DAD, 38). The protagonist's erection is a source of surprise and amusement because he has a disability, even though it represents a normal function of the human body, which a doctor should understand. Similarly, it would be difficult to imagine these nurses giggling and laughing openly, if the able-bodied and violent Patrick Brown were the one experiencing an unwanted erection.

Chapter XX challenges any doubts the reader might have about the protagonist's ability to function sexually. The chapter opens with a hawk flying across the sky, hunting for prey. The protagonist, his peers and a neighbourhood girl named Maureen are in a nearby quarry. There, Maureen expresses her curiosity about the protagonist's body and she climbs into his boxcar and runs her fingers along his groin.

“As hard as a bloody stick, you are” she said with clear, derisive emphasis... “Just like all the fucking rest!” (DAD, 137).

Although Maureen is surprised by his erection, there is some truth in declaration that he is “just like all the fucking rest!”. The protagonist is capable of expressing his sexuality in the same manner as the other teenage boys; the difference is the protagonist's sexuality is a surprise to his able-bodied peers because he is in a boxcar.

Subsequently, the accidental drowning of Maureen's brother, Nedser who falls into the quarry, interrupts Maureen's sexual advance. Nedser's death is significant because it is connected to the image of a hawk hunting for prey.

In the brimming, burning heavens the hawk had flown westward with its prey (DAD, 138).

The protagonist may have been the least able-bodied of his peers, he may require a boxcar, but this means little. It is possible for circumstance or death to swoop down like a hawk, and seize the life of even the most able-bodied.

In Chapter XV, the hawk appears in a lengthy dream sequence, which reveals the protagonist's anger about his body and his disability. At the beginning of the dream, a doctor examines the protagonist's penis. The doctor informs the protagonist (and the reader) this sequence represents reality turned upside down.

Dreaming is merely the irrational and totally unbound side of reality. It is...the absolute reversal of external experience - (DAD, 203).

Next, the protagonist meets a heavily pregnant woman with a transparent stomach. The protagonist subsequently discovers he is the baby inside. The baby's "thin, hawk-like" face is "intent and alive with fear and wonder" but he does not want to be born (DAD, 207). His mother consoles him.

"To be born, to live, to work, to love, to suffer and to die. All these things are a tragedy and the first and greatest tragedy is to be born" (DAD, 208).

Although the unborn child is fearful of a life with disability, his mother wants him to know he should not consider himself any different to anyone else. She also appears to be suggesting disability does not compare to Original Sin (it is worth remembering Brown was a Catholic and this is an example of how religion affected his writings).

The scene shifts and the sky becomes "stained, defeated, defiled, polluted by the hungry hawks of devastation". These "hungry black hawks" descend on an old "mangled" man on a bridge. Brown subsequently reveals the protagonist has metamorphosed into one of these attacking a hawk that in its fury kills the man (DAD, 216-218).

It may seem that disability is a stain and a defilement that devastates the weak and defeated. If we look beyond “external experiences”, however, we can see those with disabilities possess true power because they understand how frail the human body is (DAD, 203).

The hawk/protagonist flies onwards embracing his new found able-bodiedness, “aware of the fine freedom of his limbs upon the air” (DAD, 220). Then he reaches a graveyard. There, in premonition of the novel’s climax, he discovers his father in his grave. At this point the protagonist wakes up.

Brown uses the image of the hawk in the final line of the novel to depict the protagonist’s awakening mind (DAD, 265). He goes to a pub with his family, after his father’s funeral. There, the barman’s wife Eli asks if he is lonely before singing to him. Later the protagonist awakes in his room imagining he can hear Eli.

He raised himself and bent over a tankard by his side and looked down into the flickering amber depths at his own face, thin as a hawk’s and the eyes already voyaging, rising to meet the world (DAD, 266).

This is not a happy ending; the protagonist has not found the companionship he desires and his physical state and personal circumstances have not changed. The protagonist now understands if he goes out into the world he will - like Brown manages through the act of writing - to rise like a hawk over his disability, however.

Conclusion

Quetelet failed to recognise if l'homme moyen lives long enough he may experience some form of disability through age, injury, ill health or personal circumstances (Zola, 1989: 1). Christy Brown knew otherwise. Irish society did not expect much of him because he had a disability and initially, he believed he was at fault for issues he experienced, which were connected to his disability. He was still coming to terms with his impairment when he wrote *My Left Foot*, as evidenced by his shifting perception of normalcy. Brown matured as a writer and he embraced his impairment, however. This explains why *Down All the Days* was a critical success. In this novel, Brown debunks the myth that people with disabilities may be unable to function sexually and he reveals how the strongest and the most able-bodied face the same risks of disability and death. This novel, and in particular the character of Patrick Brown, are powerful arguments for society organising itself to cater for peoples' changing needs throughout their lives.

Final Discussion and Conclusion

Ireland is famous for giving the world some of the twentieth century's finest authors, poets and playwrights. Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan, Patrick Kavanagh and James Joyce are arguably more famous today for their literary contributions than when they were alive. Christy Brown's contributions, however, are slowly being forgotten. His biographer Christina Hambleton describes how the Irish media predominately wrote about the biopic *My Left Foot* rather than Brown's writings, during their coverage of the installation of a memorial plaque in his Kimmage home, in 2004. The media's bias could be attributed to short sightedness. Jim Sheridan's Oscar winning film is justifiably considered a real achievement of Irish cinema, although it is more concerned with telling the story of Brown's disability than it is imparting just how powerful Brown's works are. It is harder to understand why disability and literary scholars have paid so little attention to Brown's works, especially considering the critical success he achieved during his lifetime.

The able-bodied reader of *My Left Foot* and *Down All The Days* may feel Brown is writing about something far removed from their world. After all, the dominant thread of both works is Brown's attempt to make sense of a life with cerebral palsy and with a disability, during the mid-twentieth century. The screenwriter Adrian Dunbar describes this emphasis.

Ultimately, there are certain doors closed to you in society because you are disabled; this is the thing that informs his [Christy's] experience of the world. He sees it through that filter (Hambleton, 2007: 218).

Brown's writings reveal how society can close doors on its citizens because they have a disability. In *My Left Foot*, Brown reveals the connection between social oppression and physical

impairments through his moving description of being educated at home, rather than at school. He then describes his speech impediment to show how people with impairments can live with the stigma of disability. His descriptions of the medical procedures he underwent, in his autobiography and in *Down All The Days*, show why impairments like his should not be regarded solely as illnesses to be cured. In the latter work, the narrative of Patrick Brown, in particular, is a devastating case for the manner in which disability can affect anyone, at any stage.

Brown's biographer Christina Hambleton writes in her assessment that she considers Christy Brown an "individualist, a democratic thinker, anti-Church, sexual and open-minded (2007: 222)." Her conclusion refers to the entirety of Brown's works, whereas this thesis only deals with *My Left Foot* and *Down All the Days*. Her assessment can still be measured against the works that this thesis focuses on. *Down All the Days* contains several scenes in which the protagonist feels guilty about his sexuality and this guilt is compounded by having to confess his sins. Similarly, Brown brings an honesty to both works, which comes from being open-minded. He does not shy away from discussing aspects of his sexuality and family life that undoubtedly caused embarrassment to the Brown family. Hambleton's assessment of Brown as an individualist is also significant. Brown decided to use his left foot to write and he left his cerebral palsy clinic, even though this went against the advice of his doctors. Brown eloquently shows why people with disabilities deserve full autonomy over their own lives, even if this autonomy clashes with the wishes of their doctors or with the values of society as a whole.

Reflexive Summary

The author of this thesis acknowledges this work can be criticised for not leading to social change or benefiting the lives of people with disabilities directly. This is a problem most disability researchers routinely face and it is an issue Mike Oliver highlights (1990). He calls for

emancipatory pieces of research, which directly benefit the circumstances of people with disabilities.

Similarly, this thesis represents an interpretation of Brown's writings. Like Hambleton, the author of this thesis selected parts of Brown's work for inclusion and analysis and applied his reasoning and understanding of disability theory. Although this is a valid exercise, it is always best for a reader to go straight to the primary source. Christy Brown is the best person to describe his experience of disability.

An analysis of the arts is still an important undertaking. The arts expand our understanding of the human condition. This point is made by Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who best explains the function of literature in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1970.

Literature transmits condensed and irrefutable human experience in still another priceless way: from generation to generation. It thus becomes the living memory of a nation (5).

If great literature serves as a means of making sense of the human experience, then it must account for disability. For Brown having cerebral palsy was a fundamental part of his experience of the human condition and his writings attempt to make sense of a life with disability in mid-twentieth century Ireland.

Conclusion

Brown achieved many of his goals during his life. He married, he wrote several successful books and collections of poetry. His works were critically lauded at home and abroad. He was able to use his earnings to buy the Brown family home in Kimmage and provide for his mother, after his father died. His writings reveal a deep unhappiness. While growing up, he struggled with his perception of his body and he even questioned if he could contribute to society. Brown's lack of

formal education was a consequence of his disability even it was something that led him to question his obvious natural talents. Although he learnt to accept his impairment, he was regarded as a curiosity after publishing his autobiography, because he used his left foot rather than his hand to write. Although he subsequently demonstrated his literary brilliance, Brown fought depression and alcoholism, for much of his adult life. His death remains forever connected to his disability; Brown, who always depended on others to prepare his food, died choking on a dinner of lamb-chops and potatoes. He was 49.

Although the circumstances of Brown's death were tragic, Brown transcends his disability through the act of writing. He reveals what life is like for people with impairments who live in a disabling society. His friend Peter Sheridan (the brother of Jim Sheridan) wrote about Brown's contributions to Irish society in an obituary published by the *Irish Times*.

And out of the emotional turmoil...you created your masterpiece and we cried with you for all the unnameable things, unnameable lost, down all the speechless years. Oh, you were so much more than an echo in a shell. And, yes the stars are near (Hambleton, 2007: 195).

Brown succeeded in becoming a paradigm for those with impairments seeking to contribute to a society that regarded them as unable to do so. Today, the significance of *My Left Foot* and *Down All The Days* may be understated, but their power and honesty remains intact. They are essential reading for anyone concerned with disability or with Irish literature. Brown offers more than just a glimpse of how he lived with disability; he expands our view of the world and he reveals a fundamental part of the human condition.

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