高醫通識教育學報 15 期 (2020 年 12 月) : 1-25
KMU Journal of General Education No. 15 (December, 2020):1-25

Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Victorian Fear of Idiots

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Submission date: February, 2020

Date of acceptance: December, 2020

Abstract

This paper explores the Victorian discourse on fear of idiots, namely the intellectually disabled in twenty-first century. In the nineteenth century medical knowledge of Down syndrome and other types of learning disability had not yet been developed, and the distinction between the intellectually disabled and the insane was not established. Influenced by Enlightenment thought, which worshipped reason, the Victorian felt disgust at the intellectually different and thought they were not qualified to be humans since they did not perform the ability of reason like the normal people. From William Wordsworth's “The Idiot Boy” to the changeling folklore, it was apparent that the nineteenth-century people thought the intellectually disabled did not deserve love and assumed they were evil children of fairies. In “Happy Idiots,” however, Charles Dickens looks into the education of the intellectually disabled and finds that they can be trained and their intellect can be improved. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens portrays the character Smike and illustrates his adventure with Nicholas. In the story, Smike acts as the leader of rebellion against Squeers and encourages Nicholas to leave Dotheboys Hall, a school which abuses poor boys. Smike, in comparison to other intellectually disabled characters, is more subtle and interesting. Therefore, *Nicholas Nickleby* was pioneer in emphasizing the possibility for the intellectually different to develop and establish his individuality. Although the Victorian’s biased view on the intellectually disabled might still be rigid, Dickens’s effort devoted to endowing them with humanity in his works was significant.

Keywords: Smike, *Nicholas Nickleby*, the intellectually disabled, idiots, “The Idiot Boy”

Introduction

This paper aims at looking into the Victorian discourse on the intellectually disabled and how Charles Dickens wrote against it via the character Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Under the influence of Enlightenment thought, idiots were considered not qualified to be humans since they lacked the ability to reason, the most important intellectual aspect. From William Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy" to the changeling folklore, the nineteenth-century people apparently looked down on the intellectually disabled and viewed them as beings that were less than human, namely beasts or supernaturally born strange creatures. From "Happy Idiots" to *Nicholas Nickleby*, however, Dickens painstakingly attempted to prove that idiots were individuals that could be trained and improved. In what follows I will examine the Victorian discourse that derogated the intellectually disabled, and how Dickens looked into the training of the intellectually disabled and wrote the adventure of Smike to illustrate that idiots were also humans.

"The Idiot Boy" and the Changeling Folklore

Studying nineteenth-century representation of disability in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) helps one rethink about representation of disability in the present. As Martha Stoddard Holmes points out, the study of representation in the Victorian age is meaningful:

> Exploring these representation ... is not simply an exhumation of the past that has defined our limited ways of thinking and feeling in the present, but also an invitation to reopen our own narrative explorations of disability. (5)

The twenty-first century prompts one to look at disability from a posthuman perspective, in relation to technologies of prosthetics, genomes, androids, and others linking humans with machines and medical data. While technology is capable of simulating humans in the recent age, back in the nineteenth century people were merely starting to discover the disabled body. Lennard Davis writes that the word "normal" "only enters the English language around 1840" (24). The nineteenth century was a critical age that produced the narrative of disability, separating the abnormal from the

normal. England saw the development of statistics along with the Reform Act of 1832 and the Poor Law of 1834, which established the discrimination against the disabled along with the poor.

The nineteenth-century historical construction of intellectual disability focused on categorization. The production of the category of the intellectually disabled did not start until 1838, when Jean-Etienne Esquirol, the French psychiatrist, defined the difference between mental deficiency and insanity. In *Des Maladies Mentales,* he explains that the learning-disabled is not a disease, but a state in which an individual cannot develop his intellectual abilities fully or acquire knowledge comparable to people of the same age. C. F. Goodey discusses the historical construction of intellectual disability and points out that "intelligence and intellectual disability, likewise intelligent people and intellectually disabled people, are not natural kinds but historically contingent forms of human self-representation and social reciprocity" (2).

The nineteenth-century discourse on intellectual disability was one of disgust and fear. In the nineteenth century terms such as mental retardation and learning disability were not coined, and medical knowledge of Down syndrome and autism were not developed. Idiocy[1] was the key term broadly designating people considered imbeciles or morons. In the Victorian era when social concerns emerged and statistics of population were demonstrated, the intention to exclude the intellectually different was explicit. People viewed workhouses and asylums as isolated places which shut out the abnormal population from the normal. A discourse built upon discrimination was produced, which suggested that those with learning disability were degraded beings and the main population should not be mixed with them.

The Victorians demonstrated a conspicuous revulsion at the intellectually disabled people. For instance, William Wordsworth's poem “The Idiot Boy,” included in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which portrays an intellectual disabled boy and his mother as protagonists, provoked public distaste for the feeble-minded children. The early nineteenth-century people’s revolting response to “The Idiot Boy” was pivotal, since it shaped the Victorian discourse on idiocy. The Victorians thought that the mind of idiots

[1] It is derived from the Greek term “idiotes,” meaning private, personal, and lacking professional knowledge.

failed to operate with reason, the central faculty of humanity advocated by John Locke. Wordsworth wrote the poem to rebuke such an ideology, portraying a touching story of how a mother cares for her disabled son:

> And Johnny burrs, and laughs aloud;
> Whether in cunning or in joy
> I cannot tell; but while he laughs,
> Betty a drunken pleasure quaffs
> To hear again her Idiot Boy. (130)

The poem describes that Betty Foy, the mother of Johnny, is frightened by the fact that his son may get lost on the way to seeking for a doctor for their sick neighbor, Susan. It emphasizes that Johnny is an idiot boy who makes simple, meaningless sounds: "Burr, burr--now Johnny's lips they burr, As loud as any mill, or near it" (Wordsworth 242). Betty, however, still loves his son, feeling "glad to hear" him burr. When she finds him in the end, she is overwhelmed with joy and "kisses o'er and o'er again/ Him whom she loves, her Idiot Boy" (Wordsworth 250).

The nineteenth-century discourse on people with learning disability was highly biased. It was no surprise that "The Idiot Boy," which sympathized with Johnny, brought only aversion to the reader. The response of the able-bodied reader was represented by John Wilson, a scottish writer, who wrote in 1802 to Wordsworth to state his feeling of repugnance. Furthermore, Wilson criticizes that the love between the mother and the idiot son is utterly disgusting:

> The state of his mind is represented as perfectly deplorable, and, in short, to me it appears almost unnatural that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother. (113)

Ruthlessly, Wilson thinks a boy with learning disability does not deserve the love of a mother, since he lacks reason and is not good at communication.

The early nineteenth-century discourse became rigidly biased due to the enlightenment thought, according to which the intellectually disabled people were merely animals. This perspective was represented by a nineteenth-century American

physician, Samuel Gridley Howe, who compares idiots to animals, writing that idiots are “breathing masses of flesh, fashioned in the shape of men, but shorn of all other human attributes,” and “idiots of the lowest class are mere organisms, masses of flesh and bone in human shape” (37). Howe thinks that although idiots look like human, but inside they are animals, since they are creatures that are “in form and outline” “like a human being but in nothing else” (38). Licia Carlson writes that in the nineteenth century idiots were “viewed as animal-like, subhuman, or of a different race altogether” (31).

Hence, Wilson emphasizes that the mother of the idiot boy, Betty, is also only demonstrating the feeling of animals, and therefore does not deserve the tears and concern of the able-bodied reader:

> The affection of Betty Foy ... has nothing in it to excite interest. It exhibits merely the effects of that instinctive feeling inherent in the consitution of every animal. The excessive fondness of the mother disgusts us, and prevents us from sympathizing with her. (Wilson 113)

Since the idiotic boy, an animal, should not be loved, Wordsworth's portrayal of the passionate feeling of the mother made Wilson and many readers feel disgusted. Wilson criticizes that the intellectually disabled boy belongs to "improper subjects of poetry" (113). To describe the feelings about such an idiot boy "in poetry would be improper" (113).

Being aware of this biased discourse on the intellectually disabled, Wordsworth pioneered the research of Disability Studies by viewing people with learning disability as a human with his own feelings. Emily B. Stanback points out that the line “Whether in cunning or in joy I cannot tell” “confirms Wordsworth's desire that Wilson--and, by extension, the poem's broader readership--seriously consider the possibility of a cunning Johnny Foy” (63). Wordsworth describes that when Betty asks Johnny where he has been for the whole night, he “made answer, like a traveler bold” (252). The touching story illustrates that Wordsworth attempts to suggest that "perhaps Johnny was always capable of meaningful communication" (Stanback 63).

Furthermore, the nineteenth-century parents’ resistance to accept that they had

retarded children was reflected in the changeling folklore. When the medical knowledge of idiots was not sufficient, the nineteenth-century discourse on the mentally different was filled with denial. The changeling folklore had long been prevalent since medieval times, demonstrating the horror of having abnormal children, and these stories were influential in the nineteenth-century British household. From Ireland, Scotland, The Isle of Man, to England, tales describe that elves or fairies might take human children away and switch them with their own kind. Joyce Underwood Munro points out that "it is a bizarre tale," in which some fairies exchange "one of their own ill-thriven infants or little wizened old men for a handsome human infant" (251). The stories imagine that due to fairies' doing, the human parents have to encounter "an ugly changeling who somewhat resembles their own child" (Munro 251). Changelings usually cry and eat a lot but did not grow up like other normal children.

From the perspective of Disability Studies, the changeling folklore is not merely obscure imagination of the fear of unknown beings, but precise illustration of the discrimination against the mentally disabled. Patrick Logan, an author who looks into Irish fairies, directly aligns the child character of changeling with the intellectually disabled: "it was almost logical to believe that a baby who was a cretin or a mongol was really a fairy changeling" (111). C. F. Goodey also points out that "roughly from the Royal Society to the early nineteenth century, 'changeling' came to mean not only a substituted child but something like an intellectually disabled person in the modern sense" (262). Thus, the connection between the child character of changeling and children with learning disability is interesting.

Hence, the nineteenth-century British writer of folklore Edwin Sidney Hartland points out that "the children to whom the character of changelings was ascribed were invariably deformed or diseased" (105). He points out that in the early nineteenth century there was a case of changeling occurring in Monmouthshire, south-east Wales, and the physical appearance of the changeling looks like an intellectually disabled child:

> A changeling in Monmouthshire, described by an eye-witness at the beginning of the present century, was simply an idiot of a forbidding aspect, a dark, tawny complexion, and much addicted to screaming. (Hartland 106)

The child is described as having unpleasant physical shape and making too much unnecessary sounds, which are the characteristics of idiots.

W. Y. Evans-Wentz also points out that although stories of changelings seem to assume that the strangeness of children originates from supernatural conditions, such as being possessed by demons, or the bodies of children being changed by fairies, it in fact designates the dread of facing mentally different children. He writes that changelings refer to "some abnormal physical or mental condition, in the nature of cretinism, atrophy, marusmus, or arrested development" (251). Categories such as cretinism, atrophy, marusmus, or arrested development are all related to mentally disabled conditions.

The function of the changeling folklore was to rationalize people's fear. By narrating the psychiatric horror of retarded children, people pacified their panic over facing the children that think and act differently. Dee L. Ashliman, a folklorist, analyzes that folklore of changelings is composed of "historical curiosities, survivals of beliefs and practices that helped" the able-bodied people to "face the problems of life and death when confronted with mentally or physically defective children." Before science could erase people's feeling of uncertainty about idiots, in the nineteenth century there was "the popular belief that malformed and retarded children likely were not human at all, but rather the offspring of some demonic being, offspring that could be neglected, abused, and even put to death with no moral compunctions."

"Happy Idiots" and Smike As the Opposite Discourse

Nevertheless, among some of Dickens's works, one finds that he was devoted to writing against the biased Victorian discourse on the intellectually disabled. In the face of the discourse of fear on the intellectually disabled, Dickens was avant-garde in leading Disability Studies by looking into the living conditions in the Victorian asylums for the idiots. Dickens wrote in a time when the able-bodied narrative was dominating and constructed idiots as criminals:

> Attitudes to mental handicap in Victorian Britain were, however, far from enlightened. Figures in authority saw the feeble-minded as a potential criminal

> class with pronounced promiscuous tendencies. The holders of these moralistic views feared that the 'mentally deficient' might breed unchecked, multiplying their numbers and swamping the normal population, leading to degeneracy. (Donaldson 411-2)

People with mental retardation were viewed as dangerous and contagious and should not give birth to the next generation. Therefore, when asylums emerged in the nineteenth century, the able-bodied Victorians tended to view them as concentration camps or prison which kept them away from society. The asylum was seen as refuge, which detained idiots or lunatics without distinction and protected the able-bodied main population.[2]

Nevertheless, as Dickens uncovers in his article, "Happy Idiots," the lunatic asylum in the nineteenth century was comparable to the modern psychiatric hospital. Although people made no distinction between those with learning disabilities and the insane, asylums were sites that proved the awareness of the medical conditions of people with learning disabilities. Training schools for people with disabilities was established one by one in German, England, and Switzerland. Dorothea Dix, an American mental health reformer, called for better training and living conditions for people with mental illness after she visited asylums, poorhouses, and prisons in the 1840s. In 1842, Johann Jakob Guggenbühl, a Swiss physician, established his own school, the Abendberg, to treat cretinism. Édouard Séguin, a French physician, developed a physiological method that focused on motor and sensory training of the intellectually disabled.

In order to study if those with developmental disabilities were probably helped, Dickens wrote "Happy Idiots," published in 1864 in a weekly literary journal, All the Year Round. In this article a journalist explores the Earlswood Asylum, named also The Asylum for Idiots and The Royal Earlswood Institution for Mental Defectives, the first hospital and also school established for the education of the intellectually disabled. The article employs the keen eye of the journalist to observe that the retarded people also have physical difference in their mouth and palate and thus cannot pronounce words

[2] According to the 1838 Criminal Lunatics Act, if one was considered insane and dangerous, one could be arrested by two inspectors accompanied by the witness of that person's relative.

probably: “It is not surprising, therefore, that many of them are mute, semi-mute, or indistinct in utterance”(“Happy Idiots” 566).

In contrast with the general disgust against idiots, the Earlswood Asylum represented a supportive effort towards helping the mentally disabled in the mid-nineteenth century. Ann Serena Plumbe, the mother of a mentally handicapped son, Andrew Reed Plumbe, prompted the establishment of the asylum. Witnessing the suffering of her son, Plumbe discussed with Dr John Connolly of the Hanwell Asylum and Rev Dr Andrew Reed and looked for methods to improve the conditions for the mentally handicapped. Dr Connolly was the first doctor who abolished mechanical restraints in asylum. The Earlswood Asylum raised people’s concern for the feebleminded in London. In 1853 Prince Albert laid the foundation stone for the asylum and in 1862 Queen Victoria approved a Royal charter on it, which demonstrated the royal support was behind the belief in training the mentally different children.

Most importantly, Dickens finds that the Earlswood Asylum is successful in educating those with developmental difficulties. It is an encompassing place combining facilities, farms, hospitals, and schools. The children, who lack the ability of reasoning and are comparable to beasts, can now develop better sense to understand:

> Many of these poor creatures, when they were first brought to Earlswood, were in a condition inferior almost to the brutes. They were confirmed in filthy habits; they were at times perfectly torpid and completely insensible. All the gates of their understanding were as firmly locked as if they had been sealed by the hand of death. They had ears and could not hear; eyes and could not see; tongues and could not speak. And now, here on this lawn, were these self-same creatures, all more or less awakened to life and understanding. (Dickens, “Happy Idiots” 566)

The asylum was supervised by Dr. Down, the British physician who was famous for the research into Down syndrome, a genetic disorder in modern terms. The journalist is assertive that “Dr. Down's system is purely one of kindness,” and he finds also “his minute attention to every case, his liberal employment of every means calculated to divert the mind and promote the health of the body” (Dickens, “Happy Idiots” 568).

The journalist admits that the fee charged for entering the asylum is expensive, writing that "relatively the expenses at Earlswood may be larger than absolutely necessary" (Dickens, "Happy Idiots" 568). Nevertheless, he discovers that the asylum, comparable to schools for the able-bodied majority, is indeed a place intending to better the cognitive ability of the intellectually disabled. He writes,

> The number of attendants; the various workshops, with all their fittings and appliances; the schools, the play-rooms, the works of art and ornament, the organized entertainments, the cheerful gardens; are all necessary and essential to the subtle process by which these poor idiots are coaxed, and petted, and insensibly led into developing their latent faculties, and assuming, as near as possible, the attributes of useful and intelligent human beings. (Dickens, "Happy Idiots" 569)

Going against the mainstream Victorian viewpoint that the idiots could not improve their mind, Dickens was revolutionary in putting forth that they have "latent faculties," and their cognitive ability would one day be trained to the extent that they may develop reason like others.

Not only was Dickens willing to visit asylums to observe the humanity of the intellectually disabled, but he was also devoted to portraying such kind of character. There is a series of disabled characters in his fictions, most of who are polarized, either the vicious or the kind-hearted. Obviously, under the influence of the Victorian view that the disabled were less than humans, the disabled could only be portrayed as extremely evil or virtuous. In "Dickens and Disability," Stanley F. Wainapel points out:

> The battle between good and evil which underlies many of Dickens' plots is strikingly reflected in the portrayal of his characters with disabilities. They can be divided into two contrasting categories: the 'angelic cripple', usually young (most often a child), innocent, and a passive victim of circumstance or of other people's actions; and, the 'demonic cripple', usually old, corrupt, and an active victimizer of others. (629)

As one of the "memorable Dickensian children" (Wainapel 629), Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* is grouped under the "angelic cripple," together with Tiny Tim,

Barnaby Rudge, and Paul Dombey. They usually lack parental care and are maltreated by other grownups, and some of whom die early before reaching adulthood. Tiny Tim is a crippled boy in A *Christmas Carol*; Barnaby Rudge is a mentally retarded boy in *Barnaby Rudge*; and Paul Dombey is a boy in weak health and often relies on a wheelchair in Dombey and Son. The "demonic cripple" is represented by adults, who are usually wicked and do not regret treating others maliciously. One finds Mrs. Clennam, who sits in a wheelchair most of the time in *Little Dorrit*, Wackford Squeers, who has only one eye in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Daniel Quilp, a misshapen dwarf in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

The "angelic cripple" emphasizes the image of the suffering disabled child, which is analyzed by Martha Stoddard Holmes as "the afflicted-child image" (105). It conveys "a concept of disability as dependency and misery" (108), denoting that fact that the disabled children need charitable donation from the able-bodied majority and cannot grow up to be an economically productive subject. Holmes criticizes that the "popular investment in images of 'afflicted children' contributed significantly to educational programs' continuing failure to transform 'poor neglected little ones' into independent, working adults" (108). The poor, neglected disabled child is the product of sentimentalism, which advocates an able-bodied sympathy and concern. In this context, weaknesses of disabled characters fit in with the sentimental tendency to draw tears and empathy. Mary Klages analyzes that "sentimental conventions" focus on disabled people as "'posters'" and "empathic actors" (7), and disabled people are connected with suffering, which "leads to goodness" and "self-sacrifice" (58):

> The cultural associations between disability and sentimentality framed disability as a signifier of misery or suffering prompting the compassionate response of others…[A] benevolent God had designed the world so that disabled people's suffering had a positive result, in that they conjured up the highest feelings in others, and prompted them to imitate Christ in caring for these less-fortunate one. (101)

There is a mode of disability following sentimentalism, in which the disabled people are not themselves, but the trope to help others cry and feel and think about God's design of humans.

The sentimental disability hence constructed is involved in belittling the disabled. As is pointed out by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "the sentimental places the disabled below the viewer, in the posture of the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor" (341). This nineteenth-century sentimental disability was the product of the emergence of the middle class, a new group of people who needed to solidify their feeling, which was more delicate than that of the lower class:

> The sentimental disabled figure developed as part of the larger nineteenth-century bourgeois culture of fine feelings. The discourse of middle-class noblesse oblige operates on a model of paternalism, often trafficking in children and alluding to the cute, the plucky, the long-suffering… (341)

Garland-Thomson points out that sentimental disability is also a narrative built upon visuality, as disability "operates as the manifestation of suffering, a seemingly undeniable sign that makes what is internal and unnarratable into something external and narratable" (341).

Hence, "the afflicted-child image" was a cultural mode constructed by the able-bodied middle-class people to suit their need, including their desire to do charity work. Alex Tankard writes: "the sentimental model often generated 'positive' representations of disabled people," whose "lives were shown to have a profound spiritual purpose; their affliction supposedly gave them special insights into the suffering of others and, as recipients of charity, they could display pleasing gratitude to their non-disabled benefactors" (9-10). The Victorian middle-class people wanted to receive gratitude for their social fame and economic values, and the disabled people played the role of being the suffering subjects better than other minorities. This sentimental narrative of disability was a process in which "the outward expression of emotion mirrored an interior moral and spiritual state" (Moeschen 83).

Tiny Tim is one of the most representative characters who display the "afflicted-child image." Without much subtlety in himself, Tiny Tim is employed as a kind and pitiable character to inspire and change other able-bodied characters, in this case Ebenezer Scrooge, the mean, stone-cold banker who rejects the joy of making donations. To force Scrooge to change his mean way of thinking, The Ghost of Christmas Yet to

Come even creates a fake scene in which Tiny Tim is dead. Although remaining an influential character that makes Scrooge change his mind, Tiny Tim is given merely sentimental descriptions about his illness. As for Barnaby Rudge, despite the fact that he is the protagonist given detailed descriptions, he is portrayed as a fool who is easily manipulated. The story focuses on an anti-Catholic riot, which Barnaby is persuaded to join after Lord George, Gashford, and Hugh tell him to. He is emphasized as a person with "unearthly aspect" and "half-formed mind" (339), who is "a likely lad" "for many purposes'" (Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* 200). He can get happy simply by bringing his raven and idling away: "Barnaby's enjoyments were, to walk, and run, to leap, till he was tired; then to lie down on the long grass, or by the growing corn, or in the shade of some tall tree…" (Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* 194). As a result, Barnaby is trapped in prison for a long time.

Smike, in contrast to Tiny Tim and Barnaby Rudge, besides being afflicted, has also hope and struggle. Instead of being the "angelic cripple," who are "naturally happy to being sad and resigned to their state," and whose "patience and sweetness in suffering or in accepting their disability make a powerful impact on others at times" (40 Davidson, Woodill, and Bredberg), Smike is determined to fight for and alter his destiny. Having his own adventure and ambition, Smike should not be grouped under the sentimental category of "angelic cripple," serving merely as a foil to the able-bodied protagonist. When critics such as Wainapel analyzes Smike as the hopeless and harmless retarded boy, they fail to observe his participation in the whole story, which is pivotal to the adventure of Nicholas, the able-bodied protagonist. As Julia Miele Rodas points out: "While Dickens is often criticized for his sentimental and apparently objectifying representations of characters (or people) with disabilities, seeming to render disabled figures as helpless and pathetic victims…Dickens's … representations of disabled bodies (and minds) appear to be more complex than some would believe" (51-2). In the face of the discourse of disgust at idiots and the sentimental tendency to belittle the disabled, *Nicholas Nickleby* helps the able-bodied reader to understand the intellectually disabled from a fresh perspective.

Interestingly, if one probes into the story of Smike, one will find that *Nicholas Nickleby* is not only a buildungsroman of Nicholas, but also of Smike. Most critics

discuss the novel as a buildungsroman of Nicholas Nickleby, striving to fight against his hostile uncle, Ralph Nickleby, who makes him work for long hours at Dotheboys Hall. However, Smike, the feeble-minded young friend of Nicholas, is also portrayed as a young boy who struggles to fight against the malicious grownups. Describing how he overcomes his own weaknesses and fight for his future, the novel portrays Smike as much a romantic hero as Nickleby. As is discussed by Paul Marchbanks, Smike is one of the "intellectually disadvantaged characters" who "serves less central roles in their respective plots," but "their portraitures become more stable and they demonstrate greater personal agency and freedom of action" (172). In what follows I will discuss Smike's "personal agency and freedom of action" in the story.

Dotheboys Hall is a school for disabled youngsters who are given up by their own families. Squeers, the headmaster, collects tuition fees from their parents but treats the disabled children cruelly, beating them when he likes to. Nicholas is stunned by the look of the children with disabilities when he first visits the school:

> Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 54)

Squeers's leisure activity is to humiliate and scold the children who are sent to his school with his wife, Mrs Squeers. The children know that they have been abandoned by their parents and are left at their disposal.

Smike seems to be the "angelic cripple" at first when the story describes him as a poor, unpaid drudge, who has to do all the work in and around the school. He is not only mentally retarded and seems hollow-minded, but also walks with a lame leg: "The boy put his hand to his head as if he were making an effort to recollect something, and then, looking vacantly at his questioner, gradually broke into a smile, and limped away"

(Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 274). The Victorian disgust at idiots is emphasized when Mrs. Squeers sneers at him, and laughs at his intellectual disability without a tint of sympathy: "'I'll tell you what, Squeers,' remarked his wife as the door closed, 'I think that young chap's turning silly'" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 50). Smike makes his debut as a weak and submissive teenage worker: "There was such an obvious fear of giving offence in his manner, and he was such a timid, broken-spirited creature, that Nicholas could not help exclaiming, 'Poor fellow!'" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 305) Nicholas finds that the obvious trait of Smike is timidity, being afraid of conveying himself and communicating with others boldly.

Nevertheless, Smike soon surpasses the stereotypical character of being the suffering disabled child by befriending Nicholas Nickleby, an able-bodied young boy. Going beyond the sentimentalist view on children with learning disability, Nicholas and Smike befriend each other as equal individuals. Both of them are trapped in Dotheboys Hall and have to endure Squeers' endless abuse, physically and emotionally. When Nicholas first meets him, "wishing to rouse the poor half-witted creature to reason" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 58), he finds that there is potential in Smike that has yet to be excavated. Nicholas discards the binary opposition between the able-bodied and the disabled and views Smike as a good friend. As a critic Paul Marchbanks points out: "The ties binding this novel's hero and sidekick draw them and other characters onto a level playing field" (172). The novel describes how the two accompany each other and help each other out as two equal individuals despite the difference in their intellectual capability.

Later, the incident of Smike's plan for running away makes him a hero rather than an afflicted, hopeless retarded boy. Smike hints at his escape by asking Nicholas 'Should I ever meet you there?' and his tone is filled "with unusual wildness and volubility" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 80). To the reader's surprise, Smike, rather than Nicholas, is the leader who starts rebelling against Squeers, the vile authority of the Yorkshire school. His bold deed causes huge impact to the government of Dotheboys Hall, as other boys feel encouraged and stimulated: "The news that Smike had been caught and brought back in triumph, ran like wild-fire through the hungry community" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 84). Nicholas, in contrast, is only a follower,

who stays at Dotheboys Hall to timidly answer Squeer's question of Smike's whereabout:

> "Now if any other boy thinks Smike has run away, I shall be glad to have a talk with him."
>
> There was of course a profound silence, during which, Nicholas showed his disgust as plainly as looks could show it.
>
> "Well, Nickleby," said Squeers, eyeing him maliciously. "You think he has run away, I suppose?"
>
> "I think it extremely likely," replied Nicholas, in a very quiet manner. (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 82)

The event of escape is a tremendous change for Smike, who overcomes his own timidity and becomes brave enough to alter his destiny.

Hence, the story proves that Smike is not the angelic cripple who is easy to be taken advantage of. The event of running away establishes Smike as a respectable figure to Nicholas. Nicholas knows that Smike can either die in coldness and hunger in the wild or being beaten by Squeers, for "there was little… to choose between this fate and a return to the tender mercies of the Yorkshire school" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 83), but he still dares to try. Without Smike as the vanguard, Nicholas can never dare to challenge the ruthless Squeers without fearing the outcome. Smike, "the unhappy being" has now become Nicholas's best friend and family, and it "made his heart ache at the prospect of the suffering he was destined to undergo" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 83). Nicholas thinks Smike is an equal individual to him and deserves the same reward and hardship:

"And the world shall deal by you as it does by me, till one or both of us shall quit it for a better." (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 87) Sometimes, he thinks Smike helps him more than he helps Smike, saying, "I am a friend who can do little for you" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 87)

For Squeers, Smike turns from the suffering imbecile to an insurgent that is hard to control. When Smike runs away, Squeers is filled with anxiety and is afraid that if he

cannot catch Smike, the fame of his school would be ruined. Not only does he lose a labor, but he will also lose the reputation of his management of the boys. He is first worried about the economic setback, thinking that "the manifold services of the drudge, if performed by anybody else, would have cost the establishment some ten or twelve shillings per week in the shape of wages" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 84). Then he starts to worry about losing students at Dotheboys Hall: "all runaways were, as a matter of policy, made severe examples of at Dotheboys Hall, inasmuch as in consequence of the limited extent of its attractions there was but little inducement, beyond the powerful impulse of fear, for any pupil provided with the usual number of legs and the power of using them, to remain" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 84). Despite being "the wretched being " and "The poor soul " (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 80), Smike is portrayed as an influential character that has subverted the evil authority of society. Smike is at last brought back and beaten cruelly, but he becomes a hero and leader in the Yorkshire school.

Owing to Smike's revolutionary attempt, Nicholas is encouraged to confront Squeers concerning his cruel treatment of Smike. It is after Smike runs away that Nicholas finally changes his obedient attitude by standing up for both Smike and himself. Squeers is then startled by Nicholas' boldness, and claims he will find Smike and punish them harshly. He and Mrs. Squeers ride a pony-chaise and finally catch Smike. Fighting for Smike becomes an opportunity that makes Nicholas awaken from the long oppression of Squeers and grow up. When Squeers tries to take revenge and beat Smike, Nicholas objects by shouting at him:

> "Who cried stop?" said Squeers, turning savagely round.
> "I," said Nicholas, stepping forward. "This must not go on."
> "Must not go on!" cried Squeers, almost in a shriek.
> "No!" thundered Nicholas. (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 84)

After the conflict Nicholas bravely decides to leave Dotheboys Hall, the unhappy land. He does not have enough money for travel but he still makes up his mind. "He had only four shillings and a few pence in his pocket, and was something more than two hundred and fifty miles from London, whither he resolved to direct his steps" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 85). Smike is the important friend who prompts Nicholas

to grow up and face the obstacles ahead if he wants to terminate Squeers's tyranny.

Thus, the second event that reveals Smike's change is that he joins Vincent Crummles's theater troupe and attains a profession. When the two young boys go on a journey to London, Crummles sees Nicholas's potentials and let him plays the role of Romeo, and Smike is accepted as the actor who plays the Apothecary. By taking on this new job, both Smike and Nicholas attain a better life and recognition from others. Nicholas learns how to take care of Smike in the process, which again helps Nicholas to grow up and be more mature. Nicholas is very anxious at the beginning, for Smike is bad at memorizing the play, and neither is he good at understanding how to play the character. Smike is "unable to get any more of the part into his head than the general idea that he was very hungry" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 491). Nevertheless, after Nicholas practices reciting the play with Smike together, finally Smike perform it successfully. Smike is then "pronounced unanimously, alike by audience and actors, the very prince and prodigy of Apothecaries" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 167).

The last event that uncovers Smike as a romantic hero is his love for Kate. On his deathbed Smike confesses that he loves Kate, Nicholas' sister, all the time. Smike tells Nicholas that "I would have died to make her happy" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 372) and it breaks his heart when he sees Frank accompanies Kate. Smike can do nothing but knows that Frank "loves her dearly" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 372). Although at the end Smike becomes a tragic character by dying of tuberculosis and makes Nicholas heartbroken, he has accomplished enough heroic deeds to help himself and Nicholas grow up.

Leaving the place where one spends his childhood, obtaining a new job and improving one's life financially and socially, and last but not least falling in love-these are the key elements in Dickens's bildungsroman of the able-bodied protagonist. For instance, in Great Expectation, Pip leaves Joe, his sister's husband who is a blacksmith, to seek for success in London. He becomes an artist in London and is financially and socially approved. Pip falls in love with Estella, a rich girl who never returns his love, and pursues her boldly. In *David Copperfield,* David is mistreated by his stepfather Murdstone and goes to London. He lives with his aunt and later learns to be a proctor. David falls in love with Dora and then Agnes. In parallel with David and Pip, Smike is

not merely a handicapped minor character that contrasts with the protagonist to make him seem more heroic and brave. As his weakness itself is a stimulant that encourages Nicholas to take action and become a different person, Smike grows up together with Nicholas. In the story not only Nicholas turns into a man, but also Smike has achieved social experiences and develops his potential to the best of his ability. After going through all the journeys and struggles together, Smike is now no longer the "creature" that is "poor and helpless," "alone and unfriended, through a country of which he was wholly ignorant" at the beginning (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 83). Smike has become one of the most important persons who change Nicholas's life forever.

Conclusion

Smike once tells Nicholas that "because I should change" (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 221), which not only lets Nicholas realize his determination to achieve a better life, but also speaks for the character of the intellectually disabled. The change of the portrayal of the mentally disabled character is important, since the portrayal of Smike let the reader gain insight into people with learning disability. Compared to other mentally different characters in nineteenth-century literature, Smike stands out as interesting and multifaceted. For instance, Captain Ahab in Moby Dick is a stereotypical lunatic disabled character, who is marginalized by other sailors and demonstrates radical and abhorrent behaviors. Ahab is portrayed as a demented, lame captain who is obsessed with a revengeful notion of hunting Moby Dick. Although Ahab is the protagonist of the novel, he is a tyrannic captain who brings only pain and troubles for his crew and never changes and grows up. The portrayal of Ahab is rigid and lack nuances besides emphasizing his insane insistence on pursuing a whale. Ahab fails to achieve friendship with other sailors, let alone helping them to fight for their future. Furthermore, in Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason is shaped as a threatening disabled woman who suffers from mental illness and tends to endanger other people around. She is hidden away in the attic and causing disturbing and mysterious sounds every now and then. Therefore, theorists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that Bertha serves as a minor character to make Jane heroic and unique and lacks subtle development in herself.

It is noted by scholars of Disability Studies that disabled characters are rendered

reductive and hollow in most literary works. In his 1988 essay, "Disability as Metaphor in Literature," Leonard Kriegel analyzes how the disabled are connected with polarized feelings of sympathy and hatred with the example of Richard III:

> In the history of Western literature, both before and after Shakespeare, there is little to be added to these two images, although there are a significant numbers of variations upon them. The cripple is threat and recipient of compassion, both to be damned and to be pitied—and frequently to be damned as he is pitied. (7)

Kriegel finds that in literary works disabled characters draw "threat and compassion," and "Richard III represented an early example of stigmatizing cultural dictates to which even Shakespeare capitulated" (Mitchell and Snyder 197). Even Shakespeare fails to create disabled characters that are independent and lively on their own terms. To be damned and pitied at the same time, the disabled man or woman is never portrayed as other normal people. In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the disabled is even portrayed as a monster, which again induces threat and compassion simultaneously.

Notesworthily, Dickens attempted to explore the "human" aspect of people with disabilities in many works. In the Victorian age not only the intellectually disabled were considered as animals, but also people with other kinds of disability were taken as beings less than humans. The blind, for instance, were also viewed as people with inferior intellect. In order to explore the possibility of correcting this bias, Dickens wrote American Notes, a work describing a visit in 1842 to the Perkins Institution, founded by Samuel Gridley Howe. It was originally named the New England Asylum for the Blind in 1829, and was a significant institute which educated blind young people.

In the nineteenth century, when the technique of printing was popularized and the mass of reading public was enlarged, the group of the blind was encouraged to learn the skill of touching a kind of embossed alphabet similar to the Roman alphabet font. However, the system that was close to Roman alphabetic was hard for the visually impaired to learn. As is pointed out by Heather Tilley, "embossed Roman alphabets were popular as they were easily recognizable to the eyes of sighted educators, but others increasingly emphasized the need to attend to the particular sensitivities of touch"

(227). In order to suit the needs of the visually impaired better, T. M. Lucas, invented a new type of alphabetic system that stressed on contracted form of alphabets. Since the process of feeling is slower than that of seeing, the two groups of reader with different senses should be separated. Simpler signs such as semicircles and curves were employed to replace the more complicated alphabets to help the visually impaired speed up reading.

American Notes writes about how a blind girl named Laura Bridgman becomes more human when she is enlightened by the new type of alphabetic system in the Perkins Institution. She was taught by Samuel Gridley Howe and made an effort to learn the manual alphabet:

> The next step was to procure a set of metal types, with the different letters of the alphabet cast upon their ends; also a board, in which were square holes, into which holes she could set the types; so that the letters on their ends could alone be felt above the surface. (43)

Witnessing that touching letters with fingers was one of the important parts of learning for the blind children, Dickens decided to take part in helping them. In 1869, there were 250 copies of embossed version of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, printed originally in 1840, printed and sent to the Perkins Institution. They cost Dickens seventeen hundred dollars, which demonstrated his care for the blind and deaf students. Poor children, and the deprivation of proper education for them, had been Dickens's concern, as was shown both in this charitable donation and his depiction of teenagers' education in his novels.

When at last it is confirmed that Laura has learned how to read and write, Dickens emphasizes that she becomes a human being: "a fair young creature with every human faculty, and hope, and power of goodness and affection" (38). It is highlighted that she achieves human intellect:

> Her intellect began to work: she perceived that here was a way by which she could herself make up a sign of any thing that was in her own mind, and show it to another mind; and at once her countenance lighted up with a human expression: it

was no longer a dog, a parrot: it was a immortal spirit eagerly seizing upon a new link of union with other spirits! (42)

In this passage, Dickens rejoices that being literate proves that Laura becomes more human than before. Writing against the Victorian view that the disabled were beast, Dickens's fresh perspective on the disabled people proves that both Smike and Laura was inspiring.

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高醫通識教育學報 15 期 (2020 年 12 月) : 1-25
KMU Journal of General Education No. 15 (December, 2020):1-25

尼古拉斯·尼克貝中的斯麥克與維多利亞人對白痴的恐懼

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投稿日期：2020 年 2 月
接受日期：2020 年 12 月

摘要

本論文旨在探討維多利亞對白痴的恐懼論述，而白痴也就是廿一世紀所說的智能障礙。十九世紀對於唐氏症及學習困難之病症缺乏相關醫學知識，甚至未建立智能障礙與瘋癲的區分。受到啟蒙運動的影響，理性受到崇拜，而白痴因為無法如正常人運用理性，而不被視為人，讓維多利亞人對白痴感到厭惡。從威廉華滋華斯的詩《傻孩子》到調換兒的民俗*傳說*，很明顯地十九世紀人們認為智能障礙者不值得被愛，並且是來自妖精的邪惡小孩。然而，在《快樂的傻瓜》中，迪更斯記述了智能障礙者受教育後，他們的智力有所提升。在尼古拉斯·尼克貝中，迪更斯描寫了斯麥克與尼古拉斯的冒險歷程。故事中斯麥克甚至成為反抗史貴爾的領袖，並鼓勵尼古拉斯離開長期虐待他們的寄宿學校。與其他智能障礙者的文學角色相比，斯麥克顯的更富有趣味和轉折。因此尼古拉斯·尼克貝在發展和奠立智能障礙者角色的個體性上乃一先驅之作。雖然維多利亞人也許一時無法改變他們對智能障礙者的偏見，迪更斯努力賦予他們更豐富的人性仍具有意義。

關鍵字：斯麥克、尼古拉斯·尼克貝、智能障礙者、白痴、《傻孩子》