

The Sublimation of Unfitness in Victorian Fiction: Domesticating the Grotesque and Extending the Readers' Sympathies. Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier. Hildesheim: Hildesheim UP, 2023. 494pp. hildok.bsz-bw.de/frontdoor/index/index/docId/1703. ISBN 9783487163727.

This is the third volume in the series British and American Studies at Hildesheim and the first on a Victorian-era subject. It is an important work for Victorian studies as Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier offers an overarching theory towards the Victorian understanding of disability, gender, and race. In short, Victorians viewed all forms of “Otherness” as signs of “unfitness” in an evolutionary sense. This included people with physical and mental impairments or differences, and people deemed morally and socially “unfit,” such as “fallen women” and poor people. Building on Erving Goffman’s work on stigma management, Brusberg-Kiermeier contends that Victorian writers were driven by a Darwinian ideology to promote a society that was more tolerant of the “Other”. She develops her argument through close readings of a selection of novels and short stories, and by relating those readings to the work of dominant Victorian theorists and critics, especially Charles Darwin, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold.

At its core, Brusberg-Kiermeier’s contention is that nineteenth-century novelists sought to sublimate their characters’ “unfitness” to make them more sympathetic to the reading public. They did so for the well-being of the species, or at least middle-class British society, because they agreed with Darwin’s theory that a society based on mutual support was more likely to survive than one that tried to eliminate the weak. By the fin-de-siècle, however, the fear of racial degeneration in British culture meant that most writers took a view more in line with eugenics than with the social reforms espoused by Ruskin and Arnold.

The book’s lengthy first chapter provides an in-depth discussion of key theoretical concepts, with consideration to their historical development and how Brusberg-Kiermeier approaches them in subsequent chapters. Importantly, she identifies the cultural ideal of “cheerful domesticity” as a central facet in Victorian fiction (56). Not only did this ideal confine women to the private sphere of the home, it also set the standard by which “fitness” was measured, and allowed disabled characters’ “unfitness” to be sublimated by their being innocent, useful, and irrepressibly happy.

After establishing her theoretical framework, Brusberg-Kiermeier describes the different types of “unfitness” that existed in Victorian society. Notably, she distinguishes between sensorial impairments, like blindness and deafness, and physical ones like lameness and missing limbs. Sensory “unfitness” is less obvious, and can lead, as Wilkie Collins shows, to different “ways of thinking” which Brusberg-Kiermeier links to Victorian biologist Herbert Spencer’s belief that “members of a species” might benefit from “some before-unused agency in the environment” in new adversities, and therefore ensure the survival of the species (143). One strategy of sublimation Brusberg-Kiermeier demonstrates is that blind characters in Victorian fiction tend to be beautiful and possess some talent that allows them to contribute to society despite their lack of sight.

To make readers more sympathetic to physically “unfit” characters, writers made greater use of the grotesque, which nineteenth-century realist writers adopted from eighteenth-century Gothic novels, to broaden their discourse on humanity through its role in the “negotiation of beauty” (93). Brusberg-Kiermeier notes that Victorian “discourses on beauty and the human body are always interlinked with the discussion of moral standards” (94). The transgressive nature of the grotesque allows writers to play with their depictions of the human body and

question the dominant ideas of morality and beauty. Whereas earlier writers connected physical impairments with moral ills, however, Victorians used the grotesque to create “fragmented characters” whose physical exterior did not always align with their moral interior (114).

The grotesque was also used to sublimate moral, social, and ethnic “unfitness”. The last two categories are only explored briefly with a few textual examples. Brusberg-Kiermeier’s main interest is in gender and how writers challenged accepted gender norms by eliciting sympathy for characters that failed to meet them. Unfit men and women are each given a chapter in which Brusberg-Kiermeier outlines further forms of unfitness peculiar to either gender. For men she turns to the concept of eccentricity instead of the grotesque, as a term that encapsulates extremities of all sorts of masculinity, physical and mental. In her chapter on Victorian women, who could be made “Other” based on gender alone, Brusberg-Kiermeier focuses on their representation as either “angelic” or “monstrous”.

In her conclusion, Brusberg-Kiermeier discusses Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, to show how things changed in the fin-de-siècle. She reads both novels as realist works that adopt elements of the Gothic and grotesque to explore the degradation of the British race and the need for racial purity and more conservative gender politics than the New Woman was promoting. Somewhat contrarily, both novels are also discussed in the main body of the book, and Wilde’s ideas on art, nature, and beauty are cited frequently in the opening chapter. Nor is there any mention of how New Woman romance or similar genres relate to the discourse.

Indeed, Brusberg-Kiermeier’s selection of texts is somewhat limited throughout. Despite many textual examples for the types of “unfitness” described in Chapters 2-4, a small group of mid-Victorian works are given precedence. These are all by leading middle-class novelists like Dickens and Wilkie Collins, and, to a lesser extent, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters, who wrote with the knowledge of their own “fitness” for society – although Eliot’s gender performance could be questioned.

Regardless, Brusberg-Kiermeier presents a strong case for reading Victorian fiction’s depictions of Otherness through the lens of fitness and evolutionary ideologies. In fact, *The Sublimation of Unfitness in Victorian Fiction* practically demands further work exploring the types of “unfitness” and their sublimation in greater depth and has the potential to become a standard text for the studies of gender, disability, and class in Victorian literature.

Robert Jenkins