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Publication Date

2009-02-01

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“Human Weeds”: Dysgenic Breeders in Edith Summers Kelley’s *Weeds*

Edith Summers Kelley's novel *Weeds* was published in 1923 by Harcourt, Brace. Despite receiving critical praise, the novel was not a commercial success, and was not reprinted until it was “rediscovered” by Michael J. Bruccoli in 1972.¹ *Weeds* is the story of a woman coming of age in a tenant farming community in Kentucky. The novel contains some of the most graphic depictions of both childbirth and of a woman's attempt to induce a miscarriage. Interestingly, the childbirth scene was cut from the original edition by Harcourt, Brace, while the detailed description of the protagonist's attempts to abort a pregnancy were allowed to stand. Summers composed the novel after her and her husband's unsuccessful attempt at tobacco farming in rural Kentucky.² Kelley depicts the debilitating labor of farming tobacco, and the precarious living to be had from its sale, which is subject to shifting market prices, the seemingly inevitable extremes of rain and draught, illness, and other forces that are beyond the farmers' control. The tension between the outer (environmental) and inner (biology) conditions that determine the fate of the characters places the novel in the tradition of American literary naturalism. In this paper, I will attempt to disentangle the relationship between environment, gender, and biology that is at the core of the work's signifying economy. Kelley focuses in particular on the labor of the women in the community, who work in the home and in the fields, and whose bodies become increasingly exhausted by both physical labor and repeated childbirth. In *Weeds*, Kelley centers the relationship between reproduction and degeneration around the disabling effects of physical labor and repeated childbirth on a women's bodies. I will read this in the context of both eugenic

1 Charlotte Margolis Goodman, “Afterword,” *Weeds*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982.

2 Ibid.

discourses that emphasized improving white racial stock by controlling who reproduces, and activism by early feminists such as Margaret Sanger who advocated for the availability of birth control as a means to ensure the health of women.

Naturalism

The literary genre of naturalism has tended to be defined in relation to realism, often as its inauthentic derivative which emphasizes social Darwinism, specifically, the relationship between heredity and environment as it affects characters and actions. Lukács, in *Writer and Critic*, rejects naturalism as a failed genre. He argues that “naturalistic theory and practice propounds a mechanical, anti-dialectical unity between appearance and reality” (76).³ According to Lukács, realism as a literary form can be defined as a dialectical movement of social forces between the apparent and the real, with realism serving as a means to understand these forces, while privileging the accuracy of representation or “seeing things as they really are.” Naturalism, he argues, maintains an antinomian or binary structure that disallows for an understanding of historical process. However, June Howard suggests that naturalism “reveals history indirectly in revealing *itself*—in the significant absences silhouetted by its narratives, in the ideology invoked by the very program that proclaims a transparent access to the real” (29).⁴ Yet as Kaplan argues, “Realists do more than passively record the world outside; they actively create and criticize the meanings, representations, and ideologies of their own changing culture” (6). Realism's reliance on a sort of scientific method, particularly observation, is even more pronounced in naturalist fiction. Naturalism then might be critiqued for its reliance on a panoptic, objective view of reality and for its emphasis on determinism, which might be understood as

3 Lukács, Georg. *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970.

4 Howard, June, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

naturalizing rather than exposing the processes that interpellate ourselves and our social reality. The pretense of a transparent “vision of the social whole” fabricated within the naturalist novel is a way to “mediate and negotiate competing claims to social reality by making alternative realities visible” (Kaplan 11)⁵ and by exposing the constructedness of the idea of a social whole itself. I would like to suggest, then, that naturalism, as a subgenre of realism, both creates and critiques contemporary ideology through the deconstruction of specific literary conventions. While Howard and Mark Seltzer argue that the semiotic field that organizes meaning within the naturalist novel is ordered around binaries such as human-brute, environment-biology, and technology-nature, I propose rather that the naturalist novel deconstructs these oppositions via the fluid representation of characters demarcated by both values, often simultaneously.

The Body, Gender, and Naturalism

Mark Seltzer argues that naturalism's preoccupation with the material—with the details of the physicality of bodies—is a response to the scientific drive toward the disciplining and standardization of the body, toward a biopolitics; modernity's “insistent abstraction of persons, bodies, and motions to models, numbers, maps, charts, and diagrammatic representations” becomes transfigured as “composite or statistical persons, the working models and living diagrams, and the unnatural Nature of naturalism” (14).⁶ Seltzer argues that the aesthetics of the naturalist novel is “an aesthetic of caricature, monstrosity, and deformity, an aesthetics of genesis as *degeneration*” (38), as for example, the physical and moral degeneration of both McTeague and Trina in Frank Norris' novel. Thus, rather than reproducing “the hegemonic vision of what

5 Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

6 Seltzer, Mark. *Bodies and Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

the body should be” (8), which Lennard Davis⁷ has suggested is the work the novel itself performs, the naturalist text often imagines the body the way it ostensibly should never be, and yet seems almost inescapably to become: it imagines, that is, the disabled body.

American literary naturalism has tended to be an arena in which (male) writers work out the contradictions embedded in constructions of masculinity: Frank Norris, Jack London, Stephen Crane explore the tension between the brutish, animalistic nature of man and the feminized restraint imposed on that nature by social norms. Some naturalist writers chose female subjects, for instance Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Crane's *Maggie*. However, few female novelists of the period employed naturalist literary conventions. In *Weeds*, Kelley centers the relationship between reproduction and degeneration around the disabling effects on women's bodies of physical labor and repeated childbirth.

Weeds

From the beginning of the novel, Kelley makes clear the connection between the tenant farmers and the central trope of “weeds” that structures the text. She describes the weeds that invade the Pippinger farm as the manifestation of the farmer's seemingly inevitable destiny. An “unfit” farmer, “it was none of his doing if the weeds grew so fast that they soon overtopped the corn. Bill was not the inventor of weeds nor of their nefarious habits of growing faster than corn.” Although he had mastered the blacksmith trade, “chance, however, that wayward arbiter of the fates of us all, by making Bill the son of a farmer and the husband of a woman who had inherited a farm, had spoiled a good blacksmith to make a poor farmer” (4-5). Here we see the way in which, through the fluid use of the naturalist literary conventions of environmental and

7 Davis, Lennard. “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century.” *The Disability Studies Reader* (2nd Ed., Lennard Davis, Ed.). New York: Routledge, 2006.

biological determinism, Kelley reveals the processes by which a subject becomes interpellated, by the individual yields to the “a higher authority,” here chance or fate, and accepts his subjugation.⁸ This subjugation is not naturalized, then, but revealed to be constructed.

The trope of weeds, then, mediates the environment-heredity binary by rendering the labor of the farmer ineffective against the encroachment of the wild, and by positing the farmers and their families themselves as uncultivated, bare life. Zygmunt Bauman posits the following analysis of how the metaphor of the garden operates in *Modernity and Ambivalence*:⁹

The modern state was a gardening state. Its stance was a gardening stance. It delegitimized the present (wild, uncultivated) condition of the population and dismantled the extant mechanisms of reproduction and self-balancing. It put in their place purposely built mechanisms meant to point the change in the direction of the rational design. The design, presumed to be dictated by the supreme and unquestionable authority of Reason, supplied the criteria to evaluate present-day reality. These criteria split the population into useful plants to be encouraged and tenderly propagated, and weeds—to be removed or rooted out. They put a premium on the needs of the useful plants...and disendowed the needs of those declared to be weeds. They cast both categories as objects of action and denied to both the rights of self-determining agents. (20)

This splitting of the population into useful, productive bodies and bodies that don't matter enabled eugenic practices such as coerced sterilization, which was implemented to “weed out” so-called degenerates in order to fashion a better breed of citizens. Degeneracy was a broad term that encompassed anyone thought to exhibit diminished physical, mental, or moral capacities, and was believed to be inherited either genetically or culturally by children from their parents.¹⁰

Kelley describes the “dysgenic” population of farmers as follows:

In the backwoods corners of America, where people have been poorly benighted for several generations and where for as many generations, no new blood has entered, where everybody is cousin, first, second, or third, to everyone else for miles around, the children

8 I'm drawing here on Louis Althusser's “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

9 Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1991.

10 Sargent, Mark. *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilization in the U.S.* Ne Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

are mostly dull of mind and scrawny of body. Not infrequently, however, there will be born a child of clear features and strong, straight body, as a reminder of Pioneer days when clear features and strong, straight bodies were the rule rather than the exception. (13)

In this passage we hear echoes of the rhetoric of degeneracy so common during the period; the invigorated, adventurous race of homesteaders has yielded to a debased, inbred clan, as a result of poor reproductive choices, poverty, and physical labor. The passage also contains traces of Margaret Sanger's argument in *Woman and the New Race*. Sanger notes that “there were in 1910 more than 2,353,000 tenant farmers, two-thirds of whom lived and worked under...terrible conditions....were always in want, and were compelled by the very terms of the prevailing tenant contracts to produce children who must go to the field and do the work of adults” (38). Sanger provides a somewhat sympathetic account of the plight of poor rural farmers. She too links environmental factors such as poverty to biological decline. For instance, she argues that the “handicaps of ill-health, insufficient food, inadequate training and stifling toil” bring forth “degenerate” and “feebleminded” progeny, in effect conjuring the specter of the disabled body incarnating the national body to advocate for the widespread availability of birth control. Ultimately, she argues, motherhood must be “set free” by the popularizing of “birth control thinking”: “Motherhood,...when free to choose the time and the number of children who shall result from the union,...refuses to bring forth weaklings; refuses to bring forth slaves....It withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit” (45). Sanger thus ties women's need to control their individual bodies with a eugenic commitment to improve national “stock.”

Judith Pippinger is the central protagonist of Kelley's novel; she is marked as unusual by both her healthy, attractive body, and her inversion of normative gender constructs. Kelley describes the children in the “radius of about eight or ten miles about the [Pippinger] farm” as

“mostly inbred and undernourished children...they were pallid, long-faced, adenoidal little creatures” (12). Judith, by contrast, is described as different in both her physical composition and her vivacity: “There was something different in the girl's own inherited nature that made her different from her brothers and sisters and from the docile, mouse-like little girls and boys who sat beside her on the school benches” (13). Judith then is, as Kelley describes her, “a poppy among the weeds. Something more than her beauty set her apart from the others; an ease and naturalness of movement, a freedom from constraint, a completeness to the abandon of fun and merrymaking, to which these daughters of toil in their most hectic moments could never attain. Somehow, in spite of her ancestry, she had escaped the curse of the soil” (88). Judith is depicted as a genetic gem that emerges from a degraded gene pool.

Her genetic exceptionalism, however, is gendered. It is predicated on both her rejection of traditional femininity, and on her attractive, feminine, sexualized body. Judith is described as “more a boy'n a gal” (34); she rejects traditional domestic labor and prefers to work outside, planting and tending the garden and caring for livestock. Her husband Jerry describes her as different from other women: “you're the on'y woman I know that's got a man's ways, Judy” (103). Kelley's gendering of Judith's difference seems to suggest that “woman” itself is a debased, degenerate state, that Judith has somehow surmounted the obstacles of not only her genetic inheritance but also those of her sex. Yet because Judith is described as more like a man only by male characters, I would argue that this reveals how gender ideologies become embodied through discursive habits; that Judith exhibits qualities perceived as “superior” to both the men and women in the community can only be comprehensible to the men if she is imagined as more like them.

Ultimately, Kelley suggests, Judith cannot escape the biological destiny of her sex. As a result of multiple pregnancies and hard farm labor, Judith begins to resemble the other “daughters of toil.” Her body begins to take on the appearance of the other “degenerate” bodies of the “old folks” in her farming community who are disabled by physical labor: “under fifty and most of them in the thirties and forties, it was a scarecrow array of bent limbs, bowed shoulders, sunken chests, twisted contortions, and jagged angularities....Grotesque in their deformities, these men and women, who should have been in the full flower of their lives, were already classed among the aged. And old they were in body and spirit” (91). Likewise, after three children in as many years, Judith begins to “fade.” “She never sang nor romped anymore” (252), and “her face was habitually sullen and heavy, her eyes glazed and turned inward or looking out upon vacancy with an abstracted stare” (246). Her spirit is broken, and her body has begun to weaken: Some virtue had gone out of her long, muscular arms trained from childhood to do heavy work. Her breath came in short, quick gasps and she felt her knees weaken and tremble in a way that she had never felt before” (297).

I'd like to conclude by trying to unpack the relationship between the use of naturalism in this novel to represent gender, disability, and labor. By reading naturalism not as a deterministic genre, but as a form that makes visible the processes of subjectification, we can begin to understand the complicated relationship between the environment and biology as it was understood in the early part of the 20th century. Yet, in unpacking this relationship, if we use a disability studies model to critique the disabled body represented here as an allegory for the physical and material consequences of poverty and excessive physical and reproductive labor, we risk dismissing the very real, material impact on the working-class of the inequity within

American capitalism. However, if we simply understand the disabled body to signify the undesirable degradation of the national body that eugenicists feared, we reinforce ableist rhetoric about what bodies matter. Susan Wendell¹¹ has argued that like gender, disability has often been organized around a public-private division. She writes,

In the split between the public and private worlds, women (and children) have been relegated to the private, and so have the disabled, the sick and the old....The public world is the world of strength, the positive (valued) body, performance and production, the able-bodied and youth. Weakness, illness, rest and recovery, pain, death and the negative (devalued) body are private, generally hidden, and often neglected. (247)

Kelley's novel then is problematic in its representation of disabled bodies as grotesque vessels for a spiritless humanity. Yet it raises an important point for thinking about the relationship between gender, labor, and disability studies.

11 Wendell, Susan. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability." *The Disability Studies Reader* (2nd Ed., Lennard Davis, Ed.). New York: Routledge, 2006.