

2015-11

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Vance, E. "The “Dear Invalid” and the “Old Spinster”: What Vanity Fair’s Tells us about Disability and Female Agency". 10th Annual Students' Union Undergraduate Research Symposium, November 26, 2015. University of Calgary, Calgary, AB.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/51051>

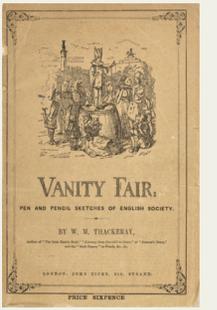
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The “Dear Invalid” and the “Old Spinster”: What *Vanity Fair*’s Tells us about Disability and Female Agency

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with special thanks to Dr. Karen Bourrier



Introduction

The invalid is a Victorian archetype that brings to mind the plight of the sideshow “freak,” the prostitute claimed by consumption, and the suffragette suffering from hysteria. When we think of the invalid, we picture a sleepy soldier with a nurse looming over him. We think of the elephant man; of creatures and beings somehow put on this earth to “entertain” us. We think of bedridden dowagers and Kings with typhoid fevers. We think of disability and instability and of the other. When we think of the invalid we do not think of our unmarried aunts. In Victorian England, in addition to physical disability and insanity, to be an aging single female, or a “spinster,” was often to also be an invalid.

In our popular imagination, “*Spinsters are women* who never marry. They are daughters but not wives, often sisters or aunts but rarely mothers, their history the contrapuntal echo of family history. [...] spinsters are defined as women who have reached at least the age of 35 without marrying. To some, the term may have pejorative connotations, [while to others] it may call attention to the autonomy of single women in the past.” (Watkins 310) Spinsters are thought to have wild hair and to be in rags. They are not affluent and respected aunts; they are women with twelve cats.

Research Method

In my research, I explore the terms “invalid” and “spinster” through a **close reading** of Miss Crawley in *Vanity Fair*. *Vanity Fair* is a classic Victorian serial novel by William Thackeray exploring the upper classes of English society in a highly and sarcastic and satirical manner. The chapter, entitled, “*In which Miss Crawley’s relations are very anxious about her,*” centres on the character of Miss Crawley, who is described as both an invalid and a spinster, thus creating the “Invalid Spinster.” The invalid spinster is a single woman, who is some way rendered disabled or sick, perhaps “self-declared” thus or *truly* ill or disadvantaged. In Miss Crawley’s case, her singlehood is made acceptable by her invalidism. **I examine criticism central to a discourse on spinsterhood and invalidism, and I argue that the two are inextricably linked in Thackeray’s invention of Miss Crawley, performing as double-edged commentary on class, agency, and sympathy, where the two aforementioned ideas inform the third.**

“All My Affliction”: The Ambiguity of the Invalid

In order to discuss invalidism in the context of the Victorian novel, it is important to look to disability critics in the field of Victorian Studies. Maria Frawley “Investigates the capacity of the nineteenth-century invalid to embody productivity and at the same time be emblematic of fatigue and waste.” She “considers the conditions under which confinement could be experienced as liberating.” **Scholars have thus far, however, overlooked the intersection of spinsterhood and invalidism rampant in *Vanity Fair*.** Unlike more modern medical terms, invalidism does not have a static, concrete definition (much like hysteria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), the term is ambiguous and malleable: this is why the term fits so well into the intricate character of Miss Crawley.



Illustration to chapter 11 of “Vanity Fair”

“If incurable but still at work, relegated to bed but still capable of travel, was the invalid something of an impostor?”

Maria Frawley, Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain



REINHARD VOLTERWAH/SHUTTERSTOCK/ANDREW BRANTON SPINSTER

“We must not fall into the absurdity of supposing that all women can be adapted to one single type, or that we can talk about “Woman” [...] as if the same characteristics were to be found in every individual species like “the lioness” and the ‘Pea-hen.’”
Francis Cobbe

The Spinster’s Amanuensis: In Defense of the “Single Woman”

In order to discuss spinsterhood in the context of the Victorian novel, it is imperative that we also revisit critics examining the idea of feminine agency in the nineteenth century. Invalidism opens a door to an acceptable form of singlehood for the Victorian woman. She is not expected to marry, for she is invalid and unwanted. It is here that her autonomous life may begin. Susan Cotts Watkins, argues that the discourse of Spinsters is central to that of “**the history of marriage, the family, and women [...] we can ask why there are so few acceptable roles other than those offered by marriage [...] raised in a society that expected women to be wives and mothers, spinsters found other niches, other occupations, other living arrangements, and so tell us of the opportunities open to women, and the constraints on them as well.**”

Privilege and the Invalid Spinster: Upper Class Afflictions

The invalid and the spinster are two Victorian anomalies that are in this case, specific to the middle and upper classes. This is not to say, however, that those of the lower classes never remained unmarried or found illnesses and disabilities that rendered them immobile. The focus here is on the concepts of spinsterhood and invalidity as presented in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*. These concepts differ in their execution and discourse with their presentation of Miss Crawley as a wealthy, unmarried invalid with companions and servants. “Sir Pitt had an unmarried half-sister who inherited her mother’s large fortune, and though the Baronet proposed to borrow this money of her on mortgage, Miss Crawley declined the offer, and preferred the security of the funds.” **Miss Crawley has become a spinster in great comfort; she does not risk living a desolate life without a husband to serve as breadwinner. A very small fraction of spinsters were unemployed or self-sufficient; “Miss Crawley was, in consequence, an object of great respect,” an object that instead of contributing to the “spinster problem” of the 1800s, is simply an aunt; without her class status she would sink to the level of the spinster problem.**

In *Vanity Fair*, like many Victorian novels, we see only upper classes at the advantage of an invalid, where reduced mobility and responsibility can lead to intellectualism. In the epidemic of the ‘invalid’ of the nineteenth century, the act of being an invalid is as much a matter of identity and choice as it is a matter of illness. The trivality of Miss Crawley’s illness is shown through intrusive narrator in chapter 33: “**Miss Crawley’s health was greatly improved since Mrs. Bute had left her,**” It is not a stretch to say that Miss Crawley and her invalid spinsterhood is emblematic of the nuances of class in the Victorian era. **Her spinsterhood is made possible by her financial agency, and her invalidism is rendered something enviable due to her care and ability to overcome limitations faced by women in the quest for agency and intellectual advancement.**

“The spinster had, however, rallied considerably; as was proved by the increased vigor and frequency of her sarcasms upon Miss Briggs, all which attacks the poor companion bore with meekness, with cowardice, with a resignation that was half generous and half hypocritical—with the slavish submission, in a word, that women of her disposition and station are compelled to show.”

Sympathy for the Devil: Invalidism as a plot device to provoke sympathy and normalcy for spinsterhood

“as for Lady Emily, the authoress of the *“Washerwoman of Finchley Common,”* her denunciations of future punishment (at this period, for her opinions modified afterwards) were so awful that they used to frighten the timid old gentleman her father, and the physicians declared his fits always occurred after one of her Ladyship’s sermons.” Lady Emily’s nature is too brash for those around her; she is unbearable. Miss Crawley, on the other hand, also has a “difficult nature” but her invalidism creates a cushion. She is made more sympathetic and easier to like because of her status as a invalid. On separate occasions, Miss Crawley is referred to as a “dear invalid,” and an “old spinster”. Similarly, as foils, the late Mr. Southdown is referred to as “that fallen angel” while of Emily the spinster, it is said, **“Most certainly, Emily would ruin everything.”** This proves the use of spinster and invalid simultaneously as a plot device: Victorian (and perhaps modern) audiences accept Miss Crawley as a spinster, not because they admire her feminine agency or intellectual self-actualization, **but because she provokes some sympathy and because she is playing into a common archetype of the time: “Signifying not simply a medical condition or exclusively a social role, invalidism might more profitably be thought of as cultural mentality, a mode of thought that shaped and a posture that expressed the way men and women conceptualized, experienced, and represented a wide range of afflictions.”** Where spinsterhood failed to become a socially acceptable mode of life, invalidity became something to latch onto.

Conclusion Concern for Miss Crawley

“She had a balance at her banker’s which would have made her beloved anywhere.” Thackeray’s beloved novel *Vanity Fair* wrestles with a plentitude of themes. It is sarcastic, sophisticated, complicated, and insightful. The novel is extremely telling of the affairs and issues of people in the Victorian era. My research is intended to prove the significance of Miss Crawley as representative of two very oddly marginalized groups of people in the nineteenth century. Prevalent in chapter 33, the research I have set out to do is important because feminine agency (spinsterhood) and invalidism (disability) were shifting in the imaginations of the Victorians at this time, slowly easing themselves into the visions we have of them today. These two concepts tie together bigger issues in the novel; class, female intellectual autonomy and literary devices. It is extremely clever the way Thackeray does this, turning a caricature of an old decrepit spinster into a vessel for ideological advancement concerning the subalternized groups of women and the disabled. In which ways do we need to apply an analysis of spinsterhood and invalidism to our lives in the twenty-first century? Perhaps we can learn about our own treatment of single women and the disabled through Thackeray’s clever narration of thus.



Photo by Byron

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