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# "Sinful Creature, Full of Weakness": The Theology of Disability in Cummins's *The Lamplighter* [Review]

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**“Sinful Creature, Full of Weakness”:  
The Theology of Disability in Cummins’s  
*The Lamplighter***

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After several decades of scholarship that discerned general patterns in literary representations of disability, recent years have seen a turn toward the specific and the particular, with a focused concentration on the ways in which individual texts and literary moments limn bodily difference. In a recent essay about disability in the early American novel, Sari Altschuler made a compelling case for this transition by showing that some of the standard claims about literary representations of disability simply failed to apply to the specific nature of early American fiction, and she consequently called for more particularized, historically grounded analyses of literary depictions of disability.<sup>1</sup> Maria Susanna Cummins’s best-selling sentimental novel, *The Lamplighter* (1854), offers an important contribution to this endeavor because in numerous ways it starkly diverges from both standard literary treatments of disability and some of the precepts of disability studies. For instance, in its depiction of the maturation and socialization of the street urchin Gertrude Flint, *The Lamplighter* does not portray the atypical body as unusual or exceptional. Instead, Cummins’s novel includes a wide array of disabled characters, and she depicts impairment as a commonplace and even inevitable occurrence: men and women, adults and children, the working classes and the elite all experience the fragility of the body, and all transition from independence to a state of dependence, reliant on the care of others for their survival. Though scholars have noted that that disability is typically shunted to the margins of literature and even rendered invisible, disability is at the very fore of *The Lamplighter*, with caregiving an active subject of discussion and concern.<sup>2</sup>

*The Lamplighter* thus offers an important contribution to this scholarly effort to document the heterogeneity of literary depictions of disability. This novel provides a particularly rich site of analysis because it portrays disability as the fundamental state of all human beings and even characterizes dependence as an ideal condition worthy of aspiration. Douglas Baynton and Lennard Davis, among others, have shown that the nineteenth century was a pivotal era in the constitution of disability, with the emergence of new statistical and anatomical standards that created both a belief in bodily normality and the corresponding classification of any divergence from this norm as a clinical pathology in need of corrective medical intervention.<sup>3</sup> *The Lamplighter* worked against the grain of this contemporary cultural development, for it instead presents disability as thoroughly normative and even beneficial, depicting it not as a condition in need of treatment but as itself a kind of remedy that effects dramatic improvement in character and belief: in *The Lamplighter*, disability is a cure, not a defect. Though *The Lamplighter* did not halt or even contest the institutionalization of these new statistical and medical norms, it nevertheless indicates the circulation of alternate views amid this cultural development and, in keeping with Sari Altschuler's important recent argument, affirms that nineteenth-century literary depictions of disability were more heterogeneous than we may have generally presumed.

However, that is not to suggest that *The Lamplighter* is wholly anomalous or deviates entirely from the standard strategies by which nineteenth-century literature depicted bodily impairment. On the contrary, it visibly enlists several conventional tropes for the literary depiction of disability. For instance, it relies on the common sentimental perception of disability as a matter of grave religious consequence, and, in accord with sentimental convention, Cummins characterizes the suffering body as a vessel of divine grace.<sup>4</sup> In her focused attention to the sufferings of a child, the orphan Gertrude Flint, Cummins also extends the long literary tradition of depicting the ailing child as sacrosanct. This tradition was evident as early as the seventeenth century in James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1671), and it reached its apotheosis in *The Lamplighter's* immediate generic predecessor, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), with its famed depiction of the death of saintly Eva St. Clare.<sup>5</sup> In addition, *The Lamplighter* also registers the influence of an alternate literary portrayal of disability as a bodily expression of depravity, as with such figures as Roger Chillingworth and Captain Ahab; though *The Lamplighter* does not expressly employ this literary mode, it nonetheless informs the novel's portrayal of irreligious characters, whom Cummins often describes, as I will show, using metaphors of debility.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, these various literary tropes confirm that *The Lamplighter* does

not entirely reject common literary formulations, but, as I will demonstrate, it instead rearranges them in the service of a more pragmatic—and less idealized—perception of disability as an unavoidable fact of life that afflicts all kinds of people, not just the supremely good or bad. In addition, these various literary tropes confirm that the nineteenth century accommodated innumerable different religious interpretations of disability, some of which exerted considerable influence on well-known literary texts. While it is not possible within the scope of this essay to offer a full account of these various configurations, a reading of *The Lamplighter*, one of the century's best-selling novels, may begin to illuminate the theology of disability in this historical period. In Cummins's hands, this theology derived from scriptural precedent and sought to impart religious authority to some of the more lowly members of society.

This essay contributes to several scholarly discussions about nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Analyzing Cummins's depiction of disability extends the recent flowering of scholarship about the religious sources and content of sentimental literature, a scholarly undertaking that builds on the foundational research of Nina Baym, Ann Douglas, and Jane Tompkins and that includes my own published work as well as that of Sharon Kim, Kevin Pelletier, and Abram Van Engen.<sup>7</sup> These recent studies, my own included, have offered large-scale reconsiderations of Ann Douglas's famous assertion that sentimental literature was theologically disengaged and indistinct; following Jane Tompkins's own resounding retort in 1985, recent scholarship has shown that this was by no means the case by documenting the engagement of sentimentalism in such contemporary theological debates as antinomianism, apocalypticism, and Arminianism, to name just a few. The depiction of disability in *The Lamplighter* similarly confirms the complexity of sentimental piety, for, as this essay will show, Cummins's treatment of disability was fortified by a sophisticated theology of impairment that she promoted without explanation or apology, despite its deviation from accepted doctrine, clerical approval, or denominationalism. Though the novel ostensibly promulgated humility and submission, its unusual depiction of disability bears ample witness to Cummins's warrant to interpret scripture and use fiction to circulate heterodox beliefs, an endeavor that derives from the contemporary culture of religious populism that resulted in innumerable self-appointed figures of religious authority and informed such contemporary sentimental novels as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>8</sup> Though *The Lamplighter* has been depicted as a tepid, minor work in the sentimental canon, its unusual promotion of disability suggests that the novel is an unrecognized counterpart to Stowe's novel, which similarly used religious doctrine to take an assertive public stand on behalf of a marginalized social group.<sup>9</sup>

This essay also extends the scholarly debate about the social applications of sentimentalism. Lora Romero, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and Laura Wexler have shown that sentimentality contributed significantly to the subordination and supervisory administration of marginalized peoples, who were deemed in need of social aid that ultimately reinforced their lesser status.<sup>10</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thompson and Mary Klages have demonstrated that sentimentality provided similar rhetorical support for the period's characterization of disability as a pitiable condition deserving of sympathy and charitable aid.<sup>11</sup> However, *The Lamplighter* complicates this assessment, for the novel envisions a body-diverse society in which disability is thoroughly mainstream. In so doing, the novel normalizes dependence and characterizes the disabled not as wretched objects of concern but as exemplary role models of virtue and civic responsibility who are benefactors rather than recipients of charity. Furthermore, Cummins declines to depict the disabled as a minority but characterizes them instead as a majority, comprising an ever-growing portion of the population that, over the course of the novel, includes virtually everyone. In her alternative depiction of disability as a majoritarian constituency, Cummins long preceded the pioneering arguments of current disability advocates who similarly claim, in Lennard Davis's words, that "disability is more the rule than the exception."<sup>12</sup> Disability in *The Lamplighter* is not the special-interest problem of a marginal subgroup, but it is instead both widespread and inevitable: Cummins suggests that everyone can reliably expect to become ill or impaired, and in this way the novel dissolves the hierarchical structures of sympathy that created programs of caregiving and enforced the powerlessness of the disabled. For Cummins, we are all impaired in one way or another, and the sooner we recognize this fact, the better.

### **Providential Disability**

The context of disability frames both Cummins's own biography and the composition of *The Lamplighter*. Born into a prominent Massachusetts family of Unitarian affiliation, Cummins began writing in her late twenties and published four novels in a ten-year span before dying of an abdominal malady at the age of 39, in this way succumbing to the premature death that so often stalked pious young women in sentimental literature. Little is known about Cummins's biography, and, as Heidi Jacobs has shown, critics have interpreted this void as evidence that Cummins led a secluded, sheltered life that left few traces.<sup>13</sup> Though Jacobs has demonstrated that Cummins led a more vibrant life than critics have supposed, this scholarly presumption tacitly imputed to Cummins some of the prototypical qualities of the nineteenth-century invalid, who was often presumed to

be reclusive and housebound. Disability nevertheless provided the initial impetus behind *The Lamplighter* and, by extension, Cummins's writing career, for she began writing her first and best-known novel for a debilitated niece, though it remains indeterminate whether she wrote the novel to entertain, console, or instruct her infirm young reader.<sup>14</sup>

This origin suggestively corroborates David Mitchell's assertion that disability often serves to "propel the act of storytelling into existence."<sup>15</sup> Composed for an incapacitated young female reader, *The Lamplighter* is preoccupied with narrating the circumstances of bodily malady. In recounting the maturation of Gertrude Flint, a feral girl serially adopted by several loving surrogate parents, *The Lamplighter* narrates her struggle with numerous trials and losses, as she contends with the deaths of several friends, the seeming infidelity of her beloved Willie Sullivan, and the mystery of her parentage.<sup>16</sup> As Gertrude evolves into a pious young woman, the novel remains focused on documenting the fragility of the body. At the level of plot, *The Lamplighter* is organized around a series of health crises, and throughout much of the novel Gertrude is occupied by the demands of caregiving as she attends to the health needs of the various people in her circle. Gertrude herself suffers two serious illnesses, one of which renders her temporarily unable to walk or care for herself, and numerous other characters struggle with serious bouts of ill health, among them her adoptive father, the titular lamplighter Trueman Flint, who suffers a stroke that leaves him partially paralyzed, and Mrs. Sullivan, Gertrude's kindly neighbor, who is stricken by an unnamed illness that causes her rapid decline. Beyond the disabilities that occur as part of its plot, *The Lamplighter* contains many characters with preexisting disabilities, the origins of which Cummins duly narrates. For instance, when the novel begins, Trueman Flint has limited mobility and strength because of a prior workplace accident, and Emily Graham, the wealthy young woman who succeeds Trueman in caring for Gertrude after his death, is blind due to an accident.

The novel's exposition of disability is not limited to merely recounting the circumstances surrounding characters' disabilities and illnesses, but it instead implicitly offers a larger theory about the origins and significance of such events. As was mentioned earlier, critics have observed that nineteenth-century texts frequently constitute disability as a bodily marker of moral temperament, with the atypical body often serving either as a manifestation of a character's moral depravity or as an expression of angelic unearthliness.<sup>17</sup> A fairly conventional work of sentimental fiction, *The Lamplighter* somewhat accords with this characterization, as the novel's most devout characters—Trueman Flint, Emily Graham, and Gertrude's neighbor, Mrs. Sullivan—each contend with a serious bodily affliction. However, the novel's treatment of disability does not fully comport with this standard depiction of saintly disability. Whereas pious, infirm girls in sentimental litera-

ture typically die before they can reach full womanhood—as with Eva St. Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Beth March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868)—Emily Graham, *The Lamplighter's* version of this stock sentimental figure, suffers no such premature death, and the novel concludes with her marriage to her long-estranged beloved, Phillips Amory, an uncommon ending that situates the disabled female saint within the conventional worldly realms of domesticity and companionate marriage.<sup>18</sup> In another departure from custom, Mrs. Sullivan's death diverges from the serene demise typical of pious women in sentimental literature, but she is instead wracked with grief and struggles to renounce her worldly attachments, despite her devout faith and personal virtue.

Composed as it was for Cummins's debilitated niece, *The Lamplighter* moderates these common modes of depicting of disability, which likely would have caused her young reader to comprehend her ailment as confirmation either of her sinfulness or her imminent demise. Whereas those two interpretive approaches represent disability as an exceptional event signaling an unusual temperament, in *The Lamplighter* illness and accident strike virtually everyone, regardless of their piety or virtue, and in this way the novel avoids characterizing impairment as a bodily manifestation of vice or as an expression of divine wrath.<sup>19</sup> *The Lamplighter* nonetheless retains the belief in the divine origins of disability, but it significantly revises the function and valence of such maladies, characterizing debility not as a sign of divine retribution but as a sign of divine care and attention. The body, *The Lamplighter* suggests, serves as a useful vessel through which the deity may intercede in human affairs and offer meaningful instruction. In this way, Cummins presents bodily infirmity not as cruel punishment but as a loving corrective deliberately ordained by the deity. In *The Lamplighter*, to recount a narrative of disability or illness is also to detail the involvement of the divine in human affairs.

For instance, in his final decline, Trueman Flint comments that his stroke has enabled him to see the purposeful workings of the deity amid seemingly random events. In a discussion with Emily Graham in which she agrees to assume care for Gertrude after his death, Trueman assures her that he is well cared for and requires no additional help, thanks to divine intervention. He observes,

't was no need for anybody to be troubled. The Lord provided for me, his own self. All the doctors and nurses in the land couldn't have done half as much for me as this little gal o' mine. It wan't at all in my mind, some four or five years gone,—when I brought the little barefoot mite of a thing to my home, and when she was sick and e'en-a-'most dyin' in this very room, and I carried her in my arms night and day,—that her turn would come so soon. Ah! I little thought then, Miss Emily, how the Lord would lay me low,—how those

same feet would run about in my service, how her bit of a hand would come in the dark nights to smooth my pillow, and I'd go about daytimes leaning on her little arm. Truly God's ways are not like our ways, nor his thoughts like our thoughts.<sup>20</sup>

Reflecting on his health as well as the events of the last several years, Trueman discerns the unfolding of a divine plan. He characterizes his stroke as an important intervention in his life and the purposeful product of providence, for it allows him to see the workings of the divine and acquire both rekindled faith and religious enlightenment. Poor, immobile, and thoroughly dependent on a child, Trueman nevertheless feels grateful and protected in the recognition that the "Lord has provided for" him a loving caretaker in Gertrude. As he sees it, Gertrude's own severe illness several years earlier led him to adopt and care for her, a circumstance that solidified the emotional bond that would cause her, in turn, to care for him. Though he acknowledges that the deity's "ways are not like our ways, nor his thoughts like our thoughts," he presents the body as a channel by which we may recognize the work of a benevolent though ultimately mysterious deity. Trueman thus interprets bodily malady not as a tragic misfortune or an act of divine anger but as a sign of divine care and a gift from a loving, attentive deity.

In sharp contrast with the common perception of disability as a misfortune, *The Lamplighter* instead presents bodily malady as a visible sign that the deity is helping to refine the temperament, worldview, and piety of the afflicted. In such scenes, Cummins invites her readers—her niece among them—to perceive bodily difficulties as an opportunity to acquire religious wisdom, as a blessing from a loving god, and as a sign of divine favor. In this adaptation of the Calvinist doctrine of affliction, disability and ailment serve as discernible bodily indicators that the deity both cares about the individual in question and is altering circumstances to enable him or her to acquire religious wisdom and personal growth.<sup>21</sup> And in further deviation from expectation, *The Lamplighter* often presents the healthy, typical body as a source of moral trouble that, unless otherwise tempered by religious piety, can lead its possessors to a series of false beliefs—among them, a conviction of personal superiority—that render them prone to sin and resistant to Christian conversion and salvation. In *The Lamplighter*, body-typical characters are often seriously flawed and in need of religious instruction, and this intervention commonly arrives in the form of bodily ailment. For example, Emily Graham's selfish, able-bodied father is suddenly felled by an outbreak of gout, an occurrence that confirms the perils of his hedonistic self-indulgence and implicitly invites him to amend his conduct. Although bodily malady and accident are often perceived as woeful misfortunes, this instance instead presents them as necessary correctives and valuable opportunities to acquire wisdom that is otherwise vigilantly resisted.

The novel's constitution of disability is particularly evident in Emily Graham's account of the accident that resulted in her blindness. Before this event, she explains, she had been a "spoiled" "child of the world, eager for worldly pleasure, and ignorant of any other" (318, 321). Able-bodied, rich, and beautiful, Emily seemed to have had every amenity of the American national ideal, and yet, as she describes it, her health and wealth resulted in arrogance, an excessive focus on worldly matters, and unconcern for the sufferings of others: her comforts, she suggests, were endangering her very soul by leading her to concentrate on such transitory worldly things as the body and material wealth. In her account of the circumstances that led to her accident, Emily depicts this traumatic event as a blessing of the highest order, for it led her to recognize the frailty of the body and worldly possessions, and to direct her attention instead to the spiritual realm, which she deems eternal and everlasting. As she explains it, "'In the eyes of the world, I am still the unfortunate blind girl; one who, by her sad fate, is cut off from every enjoyment; but so great is the awakening I have experienced, that to me it is far otherwise,—and I am ready to exclaim, like him who in old time experienced his Saviour's healing power, 'Once I was blind, but now I see!'" (321). In this triumphant narrative of conversion and personal reform, Emily attributes her piety to her disability, implying that she might never have been converted had she not suddenly become blind, and she describes her impairment as a cure or a corrective remedy that helped to rectify her selfishness. By causing her to experience pain and loss, the accident likewise renders Emily a more sympathetic, caring person, for she now vividly understands the sufferings of others in ways she had not before her accident and feels enjoined to provide comfort wherever possible, whether in visiting the ailing Trueman Flint or providing resources to people in need. Just as bodily malady initially prompted Cummins herself to commence the writing of *The Lamplighter* and undertake a literary career, so disability also led Emily to develop new capacities for benevolence and charity, which improve the lives of the many beneficiaries of her kindness. Though disability may compromise the body, in *The Lamplighter* it enables the improvement of both personal piety and the larger social fabric.

In its description of Gertrude's response to Emily's tale, *The Lamplighter* goes even further in its counter-portrait of disability, suggesting that, because of its ability to foster such dramatic transformation, bodily affliction is desirable and even enviable, as it signals divine attention, enlightenment, and virtue, all of which the devout Gertrude seeks. In listening to Emily's story, Gertrude "prayed that she too might be fitted for a patient endurance of trial, and be made stronger and better thereby, she felt her heart penetrated with that deep love and trust which seldom come to us except in the hour of

sorrow, and prove that it is through suffering only that we are made perfect" (321–22). This scene inverts conventional expectations of prayer, in which the deity is more typically entreated to heal the unwell, but Gertrude instead prays for a similar malady, which she presumes will likewise make her "stronger and better." Although this description, "stronger and better," suggestively invokes an image of bodily strength and improvement, Cummins upends this assumption with Gertrude's prayer for bodily travail. To be "stronger and better" in *The Lamplighter* is not to embark on a campaign of bodily improvement but instead to use bodily malady as an opportunity to fortify faith and refine character: improvements in piety and conduct require parallel declines in bodily health.

Emily's exclamation "'Once I was blind, but now I see!'" confirms the scriptural sources of Cummins's formulation of disability. There is a long scriptural tradition in which the body serves as a medium for divine intervention, as with, for instance, the unexpected pregnancies of Sarah and Hannah and the ailments that afflict Job. However, this exclamation signals Cummins's particular reliance on the New Testament as the chief source for her narrative. This quotation is familiar to us today because of its inclusion in John Newton's famed hymn "Amazing Grace," but it originally appeared in the Gospel according to John, with the joyous exclamation of a blind man miraculously cured by Jesus. In this episode, the once-blind man becomes an ardent believer who proclaims Jesus to be "a prophet" and defends him to the skeptical Pharisees, asking if they too "want to become his disciples" (John 9:17, 27). In this biblical episode, caregiving activates religious conversion, which then leads the healed convert to attempt to convert others. Several figures in Jesus' inner circle also practice missionary caregiving, and the Acts of the Apostles includes numerous scenes in which Peter and other apostles similarly effect conversion by providing care to the disabled. Emily's own experience follows this biblical precedent: although her body is not healed, her affliction nevertheless causes her worldview to be corrected, and it likewise sparks her conversion, which in turn causes her to care for the sick and the poor. Unlike the biblical blind man who fails to convert the Pharisees, Emily succeeds in converting Gertrude, who responds to Emily's tale with a rush of emotions, as her heart is "penetrated with that deep love and trust," a reaction that suggests that Gertrude's body, too, is subject to divine intervention.

### **Impaired by Impiety**

*The Lamplighter's* theology of disability is not limited to merely depicting bodily malady as a medium of divine intervention and religious instruction. Even though most of the novel's characters struggle with serious ailments, some of which cause lasting impairment

and even death, the novel lessens the severity of these afflictions by repeatedly suggesting that the most profound impediments are not bodily ones at all but are instead incapacities of belief and faith. If they retain their religious faith, even the most physically impaired characters in *The Lamplighter* are still capable of acting in a socially conscientious, ethical fashion: blindness, for example, does not prevent Emily Graham from visiting the sick, bringing provisions to the needy, or assuming caretaking responsibilities for the orphaned Gertrude. Similarly, Trueman Flint willingly adopts Gertrude despite his impairments from a workplace accident. Instead, in *The Lamplighter* it is the able-bodied but irreligious characters who are unable to act and who are distinguished by their utter incapacitation and burdensome demands on others. In this way, Cummins transfers onto impiety some of the traits typically associated with disability, among them inactivity and inability. To be unconverted in *The Lamplighter* is, in essence, to be impaired and immobilized.

For example, this formulation is evident in Emily's view that her life before her conversion had been characterized by dire incapacity: without Christian piety, she had been unable to apprehend the world accurately. *The Lamplighter* contains innumerable similar moments in which impiety is characterized as a form of disability, as with the reaction of Mr. Graham, Emily's irreligious father, to the accident that caused her blindness: he fails to respond and instead remains motionless "like one paralyzed" (373). When he is later afflicted by gout, he abruptly cancels his family's travel plans and selfishly demands that Gertrude abandon the dying, solitary Mrs. Sullivan to attend only to him; even though he has a houseful of servants and relatives to care for his needs, he seeks to hoard Gertrude's attention for himself and attempts to arrest both the movements of others and the benevolent circulation of charity. Isabel Clinton, Gertrude's cruel rival for the affections of Willie Sullivan, is similarly associated with obstructive inactivity: though she is able-bodied and healthy, she is so lethargic that, during a promenade, another girl inquires if she is lame, and she selfishly brings the walk to a halt when she refuses to allow her feet to become wet. Similarly, Ben Bruce, Gertrude's arrogant and moody suitor, is described as "lazy" four separate times and is marked by his conscious refusal to take action; when he first appears in the novel, he is lying indolently in the grass, a literal obstacle to passersby such as Gertrude, who, by contrast, bustles about in search of ways to be helpful, even resorting to "sorting seeds" in the Graham family summer house (122). The implicit logic underlying these several instances of willful, obstructive inactivity is the suggestion that the irreligious feel no urgent sense of purpose or mission because they are governed only by their own desires. Preoccupied with themselves and uninterested in the needs or concerns of others, they feel no compulsion to take action and instead inhabit a solipsistic stasis. This aspect of the novel markedly diverges from

literary convention, which, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes, more commonly depicts the disabled person as emblematic of “the self gone out of control, individualism run rampant.”<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, Cummins imputes those concerns to the able-bodied but irreligious, and in *The Lamplighter* it is the impious—and not the bodily impaired—who ignore the sufferings of others and make unreasonable demands.

In her allocation of traits commonly associated with disability to impiety, Cummins further suggests that, after death, those incapacitated by faithlessness will experience, for all eternity, the conditions of bodily disability. Though numerous infirm characters in the novel succumb to their ailments and die, the finality of death poses a problem only to the irreligious, who, the novel strongly asserts, may not enter heaven and thus face the prospect of eternal exclusion. For example, when the novel begins, Gertrude's new caretakers are more intently preoccupied with remedying her religious deficits than her material or educational ones, teaching her not basic literacy but lessons about prayer, heaven, and the deity. Of particular concern is Gertrude's fearsome temper, which erupts in violent outbursts and gives vent to intense feelings of rage and hatred they deem an unwholesome indication of a rebellious, wayward spirit. In describing Emily's efforts to help Gertrude gain greater control over these eruptions, Cummins explicitly depicts the girl's temper as a grievous ailment, describing it as “her dark infirmity” and characterizing Emily's ministrations as tantamount to effecting a “cure” for this affliction (63). Cummins amplifies the consequences of this affliction by asserting that such a temper has the potential to “cast a blight upon a lifetime” (63) and by preceding this description with a scene in which Emily explicitly informs Gertrude that she may not enter heaven unless she “forgive others” and “try to be good, and love everybody” (62). Gertrude's temper may not only ruin her earthly life but may also obstruct her heavenly salvation.

This scene, to be sure, illustrates the novel's depiction of impiety as a dire malady, but it also demonstrates how Cummins transferred the problem of access and mobility, which so often afflicts the bodily disabled, to the irreligious. Trueman Flint and Emily Graham both experience serious difficulties with movement and transport throughout the novel, with Trueman, for instance, unable to walk unassisted and eventually unable to walk altogether. However, Cummins suggests that limited mobility is only a temporary condition for the pious disabled, for after death they will acquire unobstructed access and admission to heaven, the most restricted of spaces. Though the impious may enjoy unfettered movement during their life spans, after death they will be barred admission to heaven, and in this way they will experience, for all eternity, the restrictions of access and movement that are typically consigned to the bodily disabled.

### Theologies of Dependence

While this aspect of the novel ostensibly preserves the conditions of inequity and supremacy that would justify shunting disabled persons to the social periphery, it is nevertheless integral to a larger theology that normalizes impairment as the fundamental condition of all human beings. Virtually everyone in the novel is compromised in one way or another, whether by disability, illness, or an impious self-absorption, and no one in the novel achieves victorious liberation from human frailty, with even the most devout, virtuous characters struggling with both bodily affliction and religious disbelief. For example, after his stroke Trueman Flint worries about how he will provide for himself and Gertrude, pleading, "What shall we do now?—what shall we do now?" (91); he later acknowledges that this outburst derived from momentary faithlessness. Similarly, on her deathbed the devout Mrs. Sullivan admits her difficulty resigning herself to the divine will. Despite Gertrude's assurance that her neighbor is a "living lesson of piety and patience" and that "no one [else] . . . seems so fit for heaven," Mrs. Sullivan openly admits her faults, crying, "O, no, Gerty! I am a sinful creature, full of weakness" (169). This is no statement of false modesty, as she is in manifest anguish at her inability to see her son Willie before her death, and her admission acknowledges that even the most saintly, devout people remain vulnerable to weakness, sin, and doubt as they continually labor to retain self-control, to behave correctly, and to gain mastery over unruly feelings. Even after Gertrude becomes a Christian and survives several serious bouts of illness, she struggles to retain her calm, kindly demeanor amid prolonged episodes of sorrow and disappointment.

All of these instances together convey the novel's belief in the inherent imperfection of all human beings, both in the fragility of their bodies and in their tendency toward sin and disbelief. As the examples of Trueman Flint and Mrs. Sullivan attest, both the body and the will actively defy human control and are vulnerable to breakdown and malfunction. Mrs. Sullivan's suggestive use of the word "weakness" in describing her moral constitution affirms the novel's discursive conflation of bodily infirmity with moral imperfection: dying and unable to care for herself, Mrs. Sullivan is indeed "full of weakness," and she uses her bodily state as evidence of her moral faults. The fallibility of bodies in *The Lamplighter* thus signifies the fallibility of human beings more generally, vulnerable not only to bodily malady, accident, and illness but also to cruelty, cynicism, and sin.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, all human beings are seriously hampered by impairments that impede their ability to function, and disability in *The Lamplighter* serves as a bodily marker not of an exceptional moral disposition but of the normal, unavoidable shortcomings that afflict all human beings.

In response to this state of affairs, the novel does not advocate strategies of self-improvement or moral reform to correct these conditions. Instead, *The Lamplighter* presumes human defectiveness to be a conclusive fact, and it presents Christian belief as, at best, a provisional remedy that may offer guidance on proper conduct and provide consolation during times of trouble. However, as the examples of Gertrude, Mrs. Sullivan, and Trueman Flint indicate, these measures are only temporary, palliative responses to a permanent problem: human nature being what it is, even the most devout will occasionally falter, and piety can only go so far in relieving the pain and limitations of bodily affliction. Rather, the only remedy the novel proposes is the willing acceptance of a state of absolute dependence. In stark contrast with the exultant rhetoric of independence that infused contemporary literature—in, for instance, both transcendentalist and antislavery writings—*The Lamplighter* instead presents submissive dependence as the only reliable means by which human beings may manage their intrinsic imperfection.<sup>24</sup> Deviating markedly from American nationalist and capitalist rhetoric that celebrated autonomous self-reliance, Cummins repeatedly suggests that control—over self, suffering, and even death—may be achieved only after human beings recognize and accept their intrinsically flawed nature, their powerlessness, and their consequent need for divine help. In this way, Cummins uses the rapport between the suffering patient and the loving caregiver as the model for the ideal relationship between the Christian and the deity. The end result is the promotion of a kind of disability normativity, which upholds dependent impairment—and not independent health—as the state to which all ethical, pious persons should aspire.

Within this framework, the disabled and sick are fortunate not only because they are the beneficiaries of divine attention but also because their maladies in effect give them a head start in this process, their ailments and injuries providing bodily confirmation of their fundamental impairment and priming them to adapt to a state of dependence that Cummins deems essential to Christian conversion. For characters like Willie Sullivan who are reared with these religious beliefs, disability is by no means necessary to develop piety, but, for affluent, arrogant figures like Emily Graham, who otherwise feel invulnerable and are reluctant to relinquish their social standing to a superior authority, corporeal affliction is a necessary way station on the route toward piety, for it instructs them in their intrinsic imperfection and need for help. Their bodies must undergo the necessary stages of conversion first in order for their emotions and affections to follow.

The novel's reliance on caregiving as a model of Christian devotion is evident, for instance, in the previously discussed passage in which Trueman despairs about his inability to support himself and Gertrude after his stroke. Though she is still only a child, Gertrude comforts Trueman, assuring him, "God will take care of us, Uncle True!" When

he asks, "Who will feed and clothe us now?" Gertrude similarly replies, "The Lord will provide" (91). The deity, she insists, will look after all their wants and gratify all their needs. Disabled and thoroughly dependent on others, Trueman can acquire peace and piety only by submitting completely to this state and trusting in the deity to provide care: though his limbs have been "robbed [of] all their power," "his pious heart was fixed in humble trust on that God whose presence and love he had ever acknowledged, and on whom he so fully relied, that even in this bitter trial he was able to say, in perfect submission, 'Thy will, not mine, be done!'" (88). Nina Baym, Marianne Noble, and Jane Tompkins have analyzed the power dynamics of this common sentimental formulation, in which virtue and piety typically may be achieved only through submission and renunciation of the individual will.<sup>25</sup> This scene, however, illuminates the implicit presence of disability in this conventional sentimental trope, for the religious state that Trueman—and innumerable characters in other sentimental texts—seeks is one of willing dependence made possible by the recognition that he is incapable and incapacitated. Sentimental submission is thus inextricably bound up with the discourse of disability, but in *The Lamplighter* this metaphorical register is brought explicitly to the fore and made literal, both in its inclusion of disabled characters and in its suggestion that all human beings are fundamentally impaired, due to their inexorably flawed moral constitutions and bodily disabilities. As Trueman later recounts to Emily, he eventually learns to renounce his desire to strive for worldly goods and submit to divine care, finding that his needs had indeed been fulfilled. Taking the terms of sentimental piety to their logical conclusions, Cummins suggests that Christian faith may be both activated and realized through acceptance of one's essential inability and the embrace of absolute dependence.

Cummins recounts the transformative consequences of dependence in a description of Gertrude's reflections as she prepares to become Mrs. Sullivan's caregiver during her neighbor's final illness. Gertrude realizes that Mrs. Sullivan's decline will cause a reversal of their customary roles, for she will now have to attend the woman who, years before, cared for her during her own grave sickness. In preparation, Gertrude attempts to gain self-mastery by submitting her will to the deity:

With the recollection, however, that she is to stand in the place of a child to that parent, and that hers is the hand that must soothe the pillow of the invalid, and minister to all her wants, comes the stern necessity of self-control,—a necessity to which Gertrude has long since learned to submit,—and, rallying all her calmness and fortitude, she wipes away the blinding tears, commends herself to Him who is strength to the weak and comfort to the sorrowing, and, soothed by the communion of her spirit with the Father of spirits, she seeks her couch. (164)

Cummins here expressly describes the deity as a caregiver who provides “strength to the weak and comfort to the sorrowing,” and Gertrude activates this divine role by temporarily affecting invalidism: feeling incapacitated by the onerous responsibilities she soon must assume, she submits to divine caregiving and “seeks her couch,” that is, takes to her bed. This transaction does not result in Gertrude’s inert passivity, but it instead allows her to achieve self-mastery by inviting the deity to control her behavior and act for her. In this way, Gertrude employs the deity like a prosthetic—like a crutch or an artificial limb—that compensates for her own deficits: she relies on the deity to aid her when she is otherwise incapable.<sup>26</sup> This scene also highlights one of the primary consequences of this state of willing dependence: upon her submission, the deity will act through her, and Gertrude not only may perform difficult tasks with perfect composure but also is transformed into an instrument of the divine will, becoming a human manifestation and expression of divine caregiving. In being cared for by the deity, she also becomes a vehicle of divine caretaking. Dependence on the deity enables self-control, but it also allows otherwise imperfect, suffering individuals to become, in effect, tantamount to apostles, who individually execute the will of the divine. In affirmation of the august stature of caregiving, Cummins asserts that, in caring for Mrs. Sullivan during her illness, Gertrude will “minister” to her (164). Disability and dependence thus enable the assumption of extraordinary religious authority.

The sequence of events here helps explain why blindness transformed Emily from a selfish belle into an exemplar of Christian charity. Her disability similarly caused her to recognize her own fundamental impairment, accept her dependence, and employ the deity as a prosthetic for her own inabilities; in exchange, she is turned into an instrument of divine care, offering help to the needy and infirm. Bodily malady works to incite faith and virtue, but it also causes the infinite reproduction of both Christians and caregivers who carry out the divine will. Christian piety in *The Lamplighter* thus spreads not just through such conventional channels as ministerial and parental instruction, both of which appear in the novel, but also through such unorthodox means as debility and loving caregiving. It is for this reason that Trueman Flint, a disabled man, serves as the novel’s titular lamplighter, whose attentive caregiving helps to spark Gertrude’s religious faith.

### Scriptural Sources

Although *The Lamplighter*’s constitution of disability was somewhat informed by the Calvinist doctrine of affliction, which promoted a related belief in bodily malady as a source of benevolent divine instruction, at the time of the novel’s composition, Calvinism

was in sharp decline nationally. In the area of New England where Cummins resided, it was coming to be replaced by Unitarianism, its more liberal descendent and Cummins's own affiliation.<sup>27</sup> The novel nowhere else affirms any allegiance to Calvinist teachings, but, in keeping with the period's climate of intensive ecumenical scripturalism, it instead took its theology of disability directly from Christian scripture instead of from the doctrine of any particular denomination.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Cummins's promotion of disabled dependence originates in the famous conversion of Paul in Acts. A disbelieving skeptic who persecuted early Christians, Paul suddenly becomes blind on the road to Damascus and is immobilized by this disability. In a state of helplessness, he receives a visit from the Christian adherent Anani'as, who lays hands on him and in so doing simultaneously heals his blindness and causes his instantaneous conversion (Acts 9:17–18). It is only after being struck down and rendered dependent that this powerful figure can be sufficiently primed for conversion, a state that requires him to accept the help of a caregiver and, by extension, the attentive care of the deity. Having himself been disabled and converted, Paul then sets about traveling and advocating for Christian belief, an enterprise that causes him repeatedly to care for the sick and disabled; in a formulation that presages the circulation of care and faith in *The Lamplighter*, the disabled infidel is thus transformed into the pious caregiver, who then reproduces this cycle ad infinitum by similarly effecting transformation in the sick and disabled.<sup>29</sup> Though Emily does not miraculously regain her sight, Cummins's use of scriptural precedent suggests that devout caregivers are the inheritors of an ancient apostolic tradition that imparts divine powers to common people. In this way, Cummins elevates not only the disabled but also the caregiver, whose arduous and often thankless work, she suggests, continues to execute the ministry of Jesus and his followers. Following scriptural precedent, in *The Lamplighter* blessed are both the patient and the caregiver.

Cummins's religious conception of disability is everywhere informed by scriptural example. For instance, the novel's reversals of conventional hierarchies of disability implicitly reference Jesus's statement, in the Gospel according to Matthew, that in the afterlife "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16). The novel's promotion of absolute dependence likewise derives from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus urges his listeners to reject worldly concerns and to trust in the deity to fulfill all their needs: "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on . . . your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:25, 32–33). The deity is the ultimate caregiver, and fervent

religious piety requires both renunciation of worldly desires and trusting dependence on divine guardianship.

The epistles of Paul, however, provide the most influential source texts for Cummins's particular constitution of disability. As biblical scholars Martin Albl, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper have observed, illness and impairment in the Bible have long been interpreted as metaphors for impiety and sinfulness, with bodily affliction presumed to function as expressions of divine wrath for these transgressions.<sup>30</sup> This enduring interpretation overlooks the complex status of impairment in the epistles of Paul, in which he offers an understanding of disability that fully accords with that of Cummins.<sup>31</sup> In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes himself as having an infirmity: he writes, "You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me" (Gal. 4:13–14). In this instance, one of the pillars of the early Christian church openly describes himself as suffering from a bodily malady, thereby dismantling any association of disability with disbelief and divine wrath. In accord with the narrative of his conversion in Acts, Paul suggests that his "ailment" may indeed have been an affliction of the eyes: he describes the Galatians as having been so sympathetic to his malady that they "would have plucked out [their] eyes and given them to" him (Gal. 4.15), a statement that implies that Paul's own eyes were the source of his trouble.<sup>32</sup> Also in alignment with Acts, Paul here attests that it was indeed "because of a bodily ailment that [he] preached the gospel," a statement that directly credits his disability with instigating his work as a missionary and that reveals Paul as the prototype of ministerial caregiving that threads through *The Lamplighter*.

And just as Emily describes her blinding as a source of blessing and insight, so Paul also characterizes his malady as a providential gift designed to cultivate virtue and humility. Though he repeatedly prayed for relief, he asserts that the deity kept this affliction intact on the grounds that divine "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9), a formulation referenced in Gertrude's prayer, discussed earlier, in which she prays for affliction to "prove that it is through suffering only that we are made perfect" (322). Paul's assertion that his malady enabled "the power of Christ [to] rest in" him (2 Cor. 12:9) also provides the scriptural precedent for *The Lamplighter's* many examples of the effects of malady in fostering conversion and piety. Like Emily and Trueman, Paul also deems bodily affliction to be evidence of strong religious faith, and he interprets disability not as divine punishment but as divine favor, as with his declaration, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions,

and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). For both Paul and Cummins, the impaired body evidences the ardent faith within.

For nineteenth-century readers familiar with the Christian Bible, these scriptural precedents significantly fortify the novel's constitution of disability, which was so at odds with contemporary attitudes as well as longstanding interpretation of disability in the New Testament. However, through these references to Pauline doctrine, Cummins suggests that any other understanding of impairment—such as the perception of disability as the vengeful fruit of divine wrath—is in conflict with Christian scripture and is thus tantamount to sin. Furthermore, Cummins follows Pauline precedent by inverting conventional hierarchies and elevating to positions of religious authority those who occupy the lowly social standing allotted to disability: the chief source of religious instruction and inspiration in *The Lamplighter* is not the clergyman Mr. Arnold, who makes only brief, passing appearances, but the infirm, the disabled, and the dying, all of whom are able to comfort and edify others.<sup>33</sup> *The Lamplighter* thus invites readers to regard the impaired not as objects of sympathy but as embodiments of Christian piety and fulfillments of scriptural typology. Moreover, Cummins's treatment of disability also implies that the national ethos of independence may be fundamentally incompatible with Christian piety and a potential inducement to sin. Well before the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century would popularize such ideals, *The Lamplighter* used disability to envision an alternative social community bound together by shared faith and mutual reliance, and the novel intimates that a meaningful, successful life is one spent in service rather than individualistic pursuit of worldly ambitions.

Despite the enormous popularity of *The Lamplighter*, Cummins's alternative vision failed to take root or influence popular attitudes toward disability. This failure may be due to the fact that she omitted the subject from her three subsequent novels and thereby declined to offer sustained support for these views. Once Mrs. Sullivan dies and Gertrude goes to live with Emily Graham, *The Lamplighter* becomes less attentive to matters of bodily health: with this relocation from the Boston slums to the affluent suburbs, the novel correspondingly shifts its focus from debility to social manners and romantic intrigues, as Gertrude navigates the complex social world of the well-to-do Grahams. This shift in interest suggests the possibility that, midway through the novel's composition, Cummins's niece may have recovered from her malady, a turn of events that may have caused Cummins to adjust the novel's focus to accommodate her intended reader's changing field of interest, as she moved from the sick room to the social preoccupations of youth. Furthermore, Cummins lacked the social or familial connections to achieve widespread social authority: unlike her sentimental contemporary Harriet Beecher Stowe,

Cummins did not have the religious or familial pedigree necessary for her to exert influence on public understandings of scripture or pressing moral questions. Nor did Cummins conduct correspondence with prominent public figures or publish contributions to contemporary periodicals in which she justified her positions or widened her public influence. With the exception of *The Lamplighter*, Cummins is virtually absent from the literary annals of the mid-nineteenth century, and, though readers may have warmed to her rendering of disability, her best-known novel failed to shape public opinion and policy. Over a hundred and fifty years would have to elapse before Cummins's majoritarian view of disability would find support in the field of disability advocacy, a field in which Cummins herself was an early, pioneering figure.

## Notes

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1. Sari Altschuler, "'Ain't One Limb Enough?' Historicizing Disability in the American Novel," *American Literature* 86 (June 2014): 250.
2. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 2000), 8; David T. Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor," *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association, 2002), 19; Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 2008), 6.
3. Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001), 35–36; Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 23–49. See also Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia, 1997), 44–45; Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, "Introduction," *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Longmore and Umansky (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001), 8; Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 3.
4. Lois Keith offers a useful analysis of sentimentalism and disability in *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* (New York: Routledge, 2001). See also Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
5. For scholarship on the suffering child, see Anna Mae Duane, *Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press), 19–57; Iain F. W. K. Davidson, Gary Woodhill, and Elizabeth Bredberg, "Images of Disability in Nineteenth Century British Children's Literature" *Disability and Society* 9, no. 1 (1994), 33–46; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 37; Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*, 94.

6. Susan Sontag made this observation in her foundational study *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 43–44. See also Cindy LaCom, "'It Is More than Lame': Female Disability, Sexuality, and the Maternal in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Novel," *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, eds. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1997), 192; Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 97–100.
7. Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820–1870*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Anchor, 1988); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985); Sharon Kim, "Puritan Realism: *The Wide, Wide World* and *Robinson Crusoe*," *American Literature* 75 (December 2003): 783–812; Kevin Pelletier, "Uncle Tom's Cabin and Apocalyptic Sentimentalism," *Lit: Literature and Interpretation Theory* 20 (November 2009): 266–87; Claudia Stokes, *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 21–22; Abram Van Engen, "Puritanism and the Power of Sympathy," *Early American Literature* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 533–64.
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9. See Nina Baym, "Introduction," *The Lamplighter* by Maria Susanna Cummins (1854; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), xvi.
10. Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997); Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993); Laura Wexler, "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform," *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 9–38.
11. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011), 220; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 82–83; Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*, 94–95.
12. Lennard J. Davis, *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest Minority Its Rights* (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 5–6. See also Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 8; Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 5.
13. Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Maria Susanna Cummins's London Letters: April 1860," *Legacy* 19, no. 2 (2002): 241–42.

14. Jane Manthorne, "The Lachrymose Ladies," *Horn Book Magazine* 43 (1967): 379.
15. Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor," 21. See also Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 3.
16. On the novel's dynamics of adoption and legal kinship, see Cindy Weinstein, "'A Sort of Adopted Daughter': Family Relation in *The Lamplighter*," *ELH* 68 (Winter 2001): 1023–47.
17. Davidson, Woodhill, and Bredberg, "Images of Disability," 42–43; Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 26.
18. See Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*, 95; and Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 2004).
19. Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 26–27.
20. Maria Susanna Cummins, *The Lamplighter* (1854; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 90. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
21. See also Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*, 95.
22. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 43.
23. See also Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor," 28.
24. For a discussion of the nationalist rhetoric of independence, see Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 43–45; David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game" *Leviathan* 8, no. 1 (March 2006): 35–36.
25. Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 22; Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 98; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 165–77.
26. My use of the term "prosthesis" follows Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*.
27. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005), 56.
28. See Stokes, *The Altar at Home*, 55–64.
29. See, for instance, Acts 19:12 and 28:8.
30. Martin Albl, "'For Whenever I Am Weak, Then I am Strong': Disability in Paul's Epistles," *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 145–58; Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, 26–27; Sarah J. Melcher, "With Whom Do the Disabled Associate? Metaphorical Interplay in the Latter Prophets," *This Abled Body*, 115–20.
31. This long-standing interpretation also overlooks John 9:3.
32. I am grateful to Rubén Dupertuis for drawing my attention to these passages and interpretation.
33. Notably, these disabled figures of religious authority are largely women, with the exception of Trueman Flint, though he has been effectively feminized by his stroke, which renders him housebound and incapable of earning a living.