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## **Depictions of Disability and Masculinity in Victorian Literature: Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Noble Life***

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# DEPICTIONS OF DISABILITY AND MASCULINITY IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE:

## DINAH MULOCK CRAIK'S *A NOBLE*

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**Abstract:** Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Noble Life* uniquely depicts disability and masculinity in Victorian Scottish society. The protagonist, the Earl of Cairnforth, is physically disabled and able to rule over his property and subjects with nobility and kindness, almost never being fully hindered by his disability. He is feminized but still regarded as a noble man worthy of respect and honor. This paper explores the relationship between disability and masculinity throughout this novel along with the intersections of religion. The implications of disability representation in the past, present, and future are also heavily considered and analyzed throughout the paper.

### Introduction

Dinah Mulock Craik is one of few Victorian authors to center the disability experience in their novels and include disabled protagonists. Her 1866 novel, *A Noble Life*, is unique for its time in its depiction of disability as it focuses on the life and emotions of the last Earl of Cairnforth and explores the intersections of the disabled and masculine experiences. Under heavy religious influence, Craik's characters view disability as a condition directly handed down by God, and the societal expectations of the Victorian era provide challenges to the representation of masculinity. Craik's novel highlights the intersections between standards of masculinity and the treatment of disabled people in Victorian society while also serving as a foundation for future disability representation in literature.

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Craik is often heralded as an underrated author, read heavily in the Victorian era but largely forgotten in the contemporary age. J Russell Perkin, in *Narrative Voice and the "Feminine" Novelist: Dinah Mulock and George Eliot*, emphasizes Mulock Craik as "an example of a woman who, in spite of a promising beginning as a writer, was 'edged' out of the field, and who therefore was unable to achieve recognition as a serious writer."<sup>2</sup> Craik "was reviewed in major periodicals and compared to other women writers, like Charlotte Bronte, who are still famous", but her work lost popularity after her death in 1887.<sup>3</sup> However, with an increased societal interest in diverse literary topics, many scholars once again turn to Craik's novels as early forms of disability representation.

*A Noble Life* follows the traditional trajectory of a *bildungsroman* but radicalizes this storytelling method for the Victorian period by centering the story around a character who cannot physically complete the typical coming of age journey. The Earl of Cairnforth is born physically disabled, being described as "the smallest, saddest specimen of infantile deformity. It had a large head—larger than most infants have—but its body was thin, elfish, and distorted, every joint and limb being twisted in some way or other."<sup>4</sup> The Earl's disability is described before his personhood, with the pronoun 'it' determining that a disabled child is less than human. He was immediately orphaned, causing those around him to call on God's mercy and remark that the Earl is "to be left to nature."<sup>5</sup> It is assumed from his birth that he will be the last Earl of Cairnforth, implying that because he is disabled, he is infertile. This, however, highlights the feminization of disability as the paradigm of aristocratic masculinity is being able to leave

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<sup>2</sup> Perkin, J. Russell. "NARRATIVE VOICE and the "FEMININE" NOVELIST: DINAH MULLOCK and GEORGE ELIOT." *Victorian Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, pp. 24–42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27794709>.

<sup>3</sup> Perkin, J. Russell. "NARRATIVE VOICE and the "FEMININE" NOVELIST: DINAH MULLOCK and GEORGE ELIOT."

<sup>4</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life." Edited by Clare Walker Gore. Brighton, Victorian Secrets, 2016: 63

<sup>5</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life," 93

behind an heir. This possibility of leaving an heir is taken from the Earl before he even comes of age, foreshadowing his lack of ability to fit the *bildungsroman* model and his preceding femininity. Because of the lack of physical access, the Earl is largely isolated for the early years of his life until he is educated by Minister Cardross and essentially joins the Cardross family. He shares an intimate relationship with the eldest daughter, Helen, who is described as having a “serious, gentle, motherly way” from a young age.<sup>6</sup> The Earl remains in love with Helen for his entire life but accepts that he can never be with her because of his disability, a societal limitation placed on him due to the feminization of disability. He does, however, adopt and co-parent her son after she is left widowed by the Earl’s cousin. The Earl, who remains unnamed until Craik reveals his epitaph at the end of the novel, is well loved by everyone he meets and transforms Cairnforth into a prosperous and joyful community. Despite having treacherous family members who connive their way into the Earl’s life and attempt to overthrow him as Earl and take his inheritance, he maintains his kindness and goodhearted nature— typical traits assigned to female characters.

### **Representation of Disability**

Craik writes in *MacMillan’s Magazine* in April 1861 that the reason for writing novels about human life is “as Milton puts it [in *Paradise Lost*], ‘To justify the ways of God to men.’”<sup>7</sup> The depictions of disability in *A Noble Life* from a highly religious understanding of the conditions of humankind. She also remarks that “human as we are, we must have something divine to aspire to.”<sup>8</sup> Under the guise of religion, the Earl’s caretakers choose not to question the

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<sup>6</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*,” 89

<sup>7</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*”

<sup>8</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*”

reasoning behind the Earl's disability and instead accept it for what it is with both pity and compassion. Craik sets her novel in an undisclosed time in the past, but it can be assumed to be the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup>-century as she describes the actions of the characters and the setting as being the results of the previous century. When describing travel between Cairnforth and Edinburgh, both in Scotland, about 40 years after the Earl's birth, she writes, "since civilization had now brought Edinburgh to within a few hours' journey of Cairnforth", hinting at the advancements in transportation in the early 1800s and revealing that the Earl was born in the late 1700s.<sup>9</sup>

Disability in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was defined differently than it is in the contemporary age. David Turner, a historian focusing on disability history from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, writes that,

"eighteenth-century dictionaries defined 'disability' as a 'being unable [or] incapable,' the usage of the term that drew most attention was that in a 'law sense', as when 'a Man is so disabled, as to be made incapable to inherit, or to enjoy a Benefit which otherwise he might of done.'" <sup>10</sup>

Thus, the Earl's experience with his disability would directly contradict the definition of disability at that time. The Earl maintains his ability to inherit the benefits he is entitled to as well as work to upkeep the land he is placed in charge of. He is able to do so with the help of the Cardross family and his caretakers, but he is also extremely mentally competent. His intelligence and sensitivity contrast with his physical limitations, representing an early manifestation of the Savant syndrome trope. Savant syndrome is defined as "a condition where prodigious talent can co-occur with developmental conditions such as autism spectrum conditions."<sup>11</sup> In literature,

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<sup>9</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life," 343

<sup>10</sup> Turner, David. "Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment." New York, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, James E A, et al. "Savant Syndrome Has a Distinct Psychological Profile in Autism." *Molecular Autism*, vol. 9, no. 1, 12 Oct. 2018

film, and TV, this trope is often a problematic form of representation as it implies that a disabled person is only useful if they can somehow provide an exemplary service to their able-bodied counterparts. While the Earl's disability is physical in nature and not mental, this representation cannot completely be classified as Savant syndrome, but it does resemble the basic trajectory of a Savant syndrome trope: Craik gives the Earl an incredible mastery over his emotions and intellect to make up for the lack of control he has over his physical body.

Clare Walker Gore, who wrote the introduction to *A Noble Life*, writes that Craik represents disability “as a spiritually uplifting and morally improving experience, which renders the protagonist selfless, compassionate and pious.”<sup>12</sup> While many readers were drawn to the sensationalist fiction that included stories of disability, critics and authors like John Ruskin believed the genre of sensationalist fiction to be “in the category of ‘literature of the Prison-house’ or ‘Fiction mecroyante.’”<sup>13</sup> Ruskin “identifies the origin of disability in sensation fiction as ‘the grotesque and distorting power’ of brain disease and other types of ‘personal weakness’ experienced by the authors of ‘foul’ fiction.”<sup>14</sup> This view is reciprocated in Henry James’ review of the novel when he remarks that Craik has always been distinguished for being particularly drawn to characters with disabilities.<sup>15</sup> This piqued interest in disability is seen as something vulgar and radical, and Craik’s portrayal of the Earl’s masculinity in conjunction with his disability is rejected by James. Throughout his review, James chooses to remark on Craik’s character and the idea of masculinity in her novel rather than the aspect of disability. James

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<sup>12</sup> Walker Gore, Clare. “Introduction.” Dinah Craik. *A Noble Life*. Brighton, Victorian Secrets, 2016. Pp 6-21.

<sup>13</sup> Holmes, Martha Stoddard, and Mark Mossman. “Disability in Victorian Sensation Fiction.” *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, 2011, [www.academia.edu/1091824/Disability\\_in\\_Victorian\\_Sensation\\_Fiction](http://www.academia.edu/1091824/Disability_in_Victorian_Sensation_Fiction). Accessed 14 Dec. 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Holmes, Martha Stoddard, and Mark Mossman. “Disability in Victorian Sensation Fiction.”

<sup>15</sup> James, Henry. “A Review of A Noble Life, By the Author of John Halifax, Gentleman.” *Nation*. 1 Mar. 1866. In Dinah Craik. *A Noble Life*. Edited by Clare Walker Gore. Brighton, Victorian Secrets, 2016. Pp 428-434.

claims that the accurate depiction of masculinity “was doubtless beyond Miss Mullock’s powers—as it would indeed have been beyond any woman’s; and it was, therefore, the part of prudence not to attempt it.”<sup>16</sup> Walker Gore insightfully writes that “translating disability into gender does have the convenient side effect of enabling critics to avoid talking about disability in itself, and to avoid the more obvious conclusion that Craik was actually interested in disability in its own right.”<sup>17</sup> James argues that Craik sees men and women through “rose-coloured glasses” and that her appreciation for human nature prohibits her from accurately portraying a story simultaneously about disability and masculinity. The contemporary reviews surrounding *A Noble Life* seem to find the novel’s trajectory lackluster, but modern critics, such as Walker Gore, determine the novel to be radical in that it does not follow the traditional sensationalist genre.

The *Saturday Review* determines in 1866 that, “she takes her stand among the remnant who have not bowed the knee to sensationalism. In the midst of a naughty and depraved generation of novelists she grows more and more severely didactic. She addresses a demoralized public in a crescendo strain of earnestness and solemnity.”<sup>18</sup> They refer to the novel as an “anachronism”, directly opposing Walker Gore’s idea that Craik’s novel was progressive for its time. This reviewer takes the opposite stand to Ruskin’s disdain towards sensationalist fiction as it is claimed that Craik avoids sensationalism and that her story of disability takes a higher moral standing than the contemporary audience. This is in conjunction with the underlying religious tones of the novel, such as accepting disability as being given by God. Because disability, in Craik’s world, is a divine ‘gift’, it provides the disabled person with abilities outside of the

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<sup>16</sup> James, Henry. “A Review of A Noble Life, By the Author of John Halifax, Gentleman.”

<sup>17</sup> Walker Gore, Clare. “Introduction.”

<sup>18</sup> Anon. “Novels, Past and Present. *Saturday Review*. 14 April 1866. In Dinah Craik. *A Noble Life*. Edited by Clare Walker Gore. Brighton, Victorian Secrets, 2016. Pp 434-441.

mortal realm, as seen in the Earl's extreme compassion, sensitivity, and kindness. However, the *Saturday Review* takes a sexist approach in explaining how the influence of novels differentiates based on sex.

“A man takes up a novel for the mere purpose of distraction. The interest which it excites is transient. Any impression which it leaves is sure to be modified and corrected by the suggestions of actual experience. He does not expect to find his ideal of a wife in the heroine of any novel. It is different with woman. In the first place, the greatest portion of her literature consists of works of fiction. From these she draws her ideas; by these, to a great extent, she regulates her conduct. Impressionable and imaginative, she lives in a little artificial world of her own, peopled with the airy creations of romance.”<sup>19</sup>

The reviewer makes this distinction because it is believed that the portrayal of the Earl's masculinity is harmful since “as, in a story, the centre of interest to a young lady is always the predominant male character, should exhibit qualities which entitle him to the respect of refined and cultivated minds”, and due to the Earl's feminization and disability he is deemed unworthy of respect to some readers.<sup>20</sup> But, Craik explicitly remarks of the Earl's character that, “For everybody loved him. Women, of course, did; they could not help it: but men were drawn to him likewise, with the sort of reverential tenderness that they would feel towards a suffering child or woman—and something more—intense respect.”<sup>21</sup> The reviewer does not overtly specify why the Earl is less deserving of respect, but it does imply sexism and ableism relevant to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

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<sup>19</sup> Anon. “Novels, Past and Present ”

<sup>20</sup> Anon. “Novels, Past and Present ”

<sup>21</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*,” 236



Craik represents the Earl as a figure of extreme innocence and purity. She takes the opposite route to sensationalism and portrays disability as a sort of divine intervention to signify purity of heart and soul, even if the body is deemed impure. After the Earl begins co-parenting Helen's son, the boy says to his mother, "I know Jesus. He is the Earl."<sup>22</sup> Children are often the epitome of purity in literature, and to have a child remark on the purity of an adult speaks to the infantilization of disabled people. Even though the Earl is a trusted authority figure, the essence of his character is that he is untainted by the woes of the world despite his physical disadvantage. The Earl's purity helps to legitimize his position as a person in power, and instead of being looked down upon by those in Cairnforth he was revered for accomplishing feats while being disabled. Helen attempted to describe the Earl's disability to her son, but he failed to understand his affliction. She writes, "There seemed to him something not inferior, but superior to all other people, in that motionless figure with its calm sweet face—who was never troubled, never displeased—whom everybody delighted to obey, and at whose feet lay treasures untold."<sup>23</sup>

Through the innocent mind of a child, disability is not seen as a disadvantage. However, because the Earl is used to receiving pity, he obtains a significant ability to always appear calm and gracious; he never allows himself to feel the troubles and sadness that come with being disabled. Perhaps it is because he does not allow for self-pity that he is deemed respectable: he appears to be other-worldly as he handles disability with a grace that is incomprehensible to his able-bodied counterparts.

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<sup>22</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life," 317

<sup>23</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life," 317

## Masculinity and Disability

The *Saturday Review* takes issue with Craik's portrayal of the Earl's manhood. In this review of the novel, the reviewer writes that the Earl fits into the literary category of "perfecting strength out of weakness" and that the Earl's character "expressed two of the most creditable feminine instincts – the instinct to improve the world by means of those moral teachings which may be conveniently conveyed through some such mouthpiece, and the instinct to admire moral, as distinct from material, power."<sup>24</sup> The *Saturday Review* then justifies this characterization of disabled people as a way to "to redress the balance of power between the sexes, and to remind their readers that, in spite of the vaunted superiority of man, there are heights of moral elevation, and even influence, which woman may claim as peculiarly her own."<sup>25</sup> By taking away the Earl's physical traits of typical masculinity, such as strength, height, and the ability to reproduce, it is interpreted as a way to produce some sort of gender equality: what the Earl lacks in masculine characteristics, he makes up for in the best of feminine attributes. However, this remains a problematic interpretation to many Victorian readers as it is believed that men should always be masculine figures so as to teach female readers that they should "admire what is truly admirable in the opposite sex, and weaned as far as possible from the mere fetish-worship of money and a moustache."<sup>26</sup> Despite these qualms, the feminine and disabled male character made his way into many novels throughout the Victorian era as "a response to the rise of a new Victorian culture of industry and vitality, and its corollary emphasis on a hardy, active manhood."<sup>27</sup> The hero of

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<sup>24</sup> Anon. "Novels, Past and Present "

<sup>25</sup> Anon. "Novels, Past and Present "

<sup>26</sup> Anon. "Novels, Past and Present "

<sup>27</sup> Bourrier, Karen. *The Measure of Manliness*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 10 Apr. 2015.

Victorian literature shifted to both reflect and counter the strong, able-bodied, Christian man that was deemed desirable by society.

Most depictions of disabled male characters during the Victorian era were used as foils to able-bodied male characters. For instance, in Craik's most famous novel, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), the story is narrated by a disabled male character who tells the story of the life of the much stronger and more capable John Halifax. The narrator of the story serves to soften Halifax, and the two share a close homoerotic relationship that was written away by society because the disabled man was essentially characterized as a woman.<sup>28</sup> While Craik is guilty of using the trope of employing disabled characters simply to elevate the able-bodied protagonists, she eventually drifted from the stereotypes and created the unique journey of the Earl of Cairnforth. *A Noble Life* is all the more important for disability representation because, according to Bourrier,

“narrative innovation demonstrates how, far from being marginalized in a culture that prized health and industry, weakness and disability came to serve an integral role in shaping narrative form, and ideas of what it meant to be a man in the Victorian era and beyond. The weak or disabled man thus often appeared as a friend or rival of the strong protagonist and took on the affective and narrative burdens that would undermine the hero's strength. Male invalidism and disability persisted as an alternative and complementary Victorian mode of masculinity, supplementing masculine strength, which might otherwise appear coarse and unfeeling, with loquaciousness and susceptibility.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Moore, Melina. “John Halifax, Gentleman.” *Nineteenth-Century Disability: Cultures and Contexts*. [www.nineteenthcenturydisability.org/items/show/20](http://www.nineteenthcenturydisability.org/items/show/20). Accessed 14 Dec. 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Bourrier, Karen. “*The Measure of Manliness*”

Craik did not use the Earl's masculinity to enhance the masculinity of another character; she gave him his own journey and expressed his masculinity through atypical ways, keeping his manhood at the forefront of his experiences. Bourrier also discusses how "By contrast to this strong hero, who is mainly distinguished by his athletic prowess, the weak or disabled man was physically distinct and able to articulate his feelings, as well as narrating those of his stronger friend."<sup>30</sup>

Historian Josephine Jobbins traces the roots of toxic masculinity to the Victorian period. She writes in her article, *Man Up – The Victorian Origins of Toxic Masculinity* (2017), "Broadly, Victorian masculinity can be outlined as an ideology of spirituality and earnestness between 1837 and 1870, that changed to one of strength and stoicism from 1870."<sup>31</sup> Craik writes *A Noble Life* during the end of the period that Jobbins describes as spiritual and earnest, two characteristics she heavily applies to the Earl. Many historians pin the shift in gender roles to the burgeoning industrial and economic sectors of British life. With the changing society and increased importance on imperialism, the responsibilities of men needed to change as well. Author Martin A. Danahay claims that the male identity in the Victorian era was modeled on the Protestant work ethic, which equated worth with the amount of labor produced under a strong religious pretext. The Earl is unable to physically work because of his disability, so his time is largely spent reading, telling stories, and delegating work on behalf of Cairnforth. Unable to conform to the traditional masculine work ethic leaves the Earl with the pressure to be useful to those around him. Bourrier, in comparing the past times of traditional strong men to 'weak' men,

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<sup>30</sup> Bourrier, Karen. "The Measure of Manliness"

<sup>31</sup> Jobbins, Josephine. "Man up – the Victorian Origins of Toxic Masculinity – the Historian." Qmul.ac.uk, 2017, [www.projects.history.qmul.ac.uk/thehistorian/2017/05/12/man-up-the-victorian-origins-of-toxic-masculinity/](http://www.projects.history.qmul.ac.uk/thehistorian/2017/05/12/man-up-the-victorian-origins-of-toxic-masculinity/). Accessed 12 December 2022.

quotes from Walter Scott's memoir: "My lameness and my solitary habits had made me a tolerable reader," he writes, "and my hours of leisure were usually spent in reading aloud to my mother."<sup>32</sup> Craik would have been aware of the previous representations of disabled men in literature, so even though her novel takes place before the Victorian period she gives the Earl typical characteristics of disabled Victorian men. The Earl relies on storytelling because it gave him the opportunity to feel connected to those around him, something he was unable to do physically. The Earl more closely falls into the trope of "The muscular Christian hero of the 1850s [who] was a broad-church man who was more interested in rowing than debating the finer points of theology, and whose worship was all the healthier for it."<sup>33</sup> Although the Earl is unable to fit into society in the traditional way, his insurmountable wealth and privilege allow him to fill roles that poorer disabled men could not.

Along with his inherited wealth, the Earl has the supposed comforts of a strictly religious society. However, while the intentions of a religious society are to help and guide the followers, it in fact makes it more difficult for the Earl and those around him to discuss in depth his condition and how it affects him, lending a hand in the inability for Victorian men to communicate their feelings. Throughout the novel, the Earl maintains a sense of stoicism surrounding his disability so as to not burden his chosen family. While he is a more highly emotional man than the men he surrounds himself with, the emotions which seem to perturb him the most are withheld from those he trusts. This may be due to the discourse surrounding the reason behind his disability; since his birth, the adults in his life claimed "He is what God made him, what God willed him to be," said the minister, solemnly. 'We know not why it should be so:

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<sup>32</sup> Bourrier, Karen. *"The Measure of Manliness"*

<sup>33</sup> Bourrier, Karen. *"The Measure of Manliness"*

we only know that it is—and we cannot alter it. We can not remove from him his heavy cross; but I think we can help him to bear it.”<sup>34</sup> Without question, his disability is attributed to God and it is decided that it will not be thought of any more than as something that God willed. The complex feelings that surround disability are not explored, allowing the Earl to fall into the traditional masculine experience of withholding emotions. The thing that separates him from other men, his disability, is also the thing that allows him a glimpse into Victorian masculine stoicism due to his heavily religious upbringing. It is also notable that the minister, without question, offers to help the Earl bear his burden from birth. The minister is characterized as a benevolent and wise man who is beloved throughout Cairnforth, but perhaps this is Craik also utilizing the trope of a disabled man helping to bring out the best in the stronger, able-bodied man. During the Earl’s childhood, the only character to never shy away from his physical state was Helen, as Craik states, “Men shrink so much more than women from any physical suffering or deformity.”<sup>35</sup> The minister eventually moves forward from his discomfort and treats the Earl as a member of his own family. The Earl and the minister both solidify their faith through each other; the Earl helps the minister grow in his acceptance and the minister helps to bring the Earl comfort through God. Although, it seems as though religion acts more as a comfort to the able-bodied characters as it is easier for them to will something away through God when they do not have to physically experience the torments of God’s will. The Earl expresses his faith in God, as Craik writes, “‘He is a just God. In my worst trials I have never doubted that,’ replied Lord Cairnforth, solemnly.”<sup>36</sup> While the Earl expresses his love for the savior, he does so in a manner

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<sup>34</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*,” 118

<sup>35</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*,” 99

<sup>36</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*,” 399

that implies there is an unspoken sadness or disdain towards his situation that he is unable to express due to Victorian masculinity standards and strict religious beliefs.

Even though the Earl is described throughout the novel as a respectable man, he and those closest to him occasionally struggle with his ability to act on his masculine duties due to the standards imposed on them by the Protestant work ethic. When he offers to take Helen's son to Edinburgh for university, Helen is shocked at his offering to do so, to which the Earl replies, "You think I shall be useless? – that it is a man, and not such a creature as I, who ought to take charge of your boy?"<sup>37</sup> The Earl then goes on to describe why he would be the best person to go with Helen's son, as he says, "I shall also give him somebody to take care of. I shall be as much charge to him almost as a woman—and it will be good for him."<sup>38</sup> Despite his proven ability to take care of the boy and his duties as Earl, the most masculine position of fatherhood is still out of his reach. The Earl compares himself to a woman, showing the overtness to which disabled men were feminized both in literature and in contemporary society. The Earl's masculinity is not used to either elevate or incriminate the boy's biological father's masculinity. The Earl's cousin, Bruce, passed away before he was able to raise the child and after he connived his way into the Cardross family, which left his memory tainted. However, it is made clear throughout the child's life that the Earl is the best option for his father-figure on the basis of the Earl's integrity, respectability, and compassion rather than his masculinity. It is as though the Earl's feminine attributes best suit him for the titles of masculine role model and father.

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<sup>37</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life," 375

<sup>38</sup> Craik, Dinah. "A Noble Life," 376

## Implications and Progression of Disability Representation

The Cambridge Dictionary defines toxic masculinity “as ideas about the way that men should behave that are seen as harmful, for example the idea that men should not cry or admit weakness.”<sup>39</sup> Josephine Jobbins argues that toxic masculinity originates from the Victorian era standards of masculinity and claims that “Strength and athleticism were vital aspects of Victorian masculinity, as today. In the twenty-first century, this often takes the form of unrealistic expectations of the male body, as exemplified in the ever-popular superhero film, which reflects a wider expectation of emotional strength.”<sup>40</sup> Because of Britain’s global expansionism, “Physical rigour was needed for men to be fit enough to fight and defend the British Empire. Late Victorian ideals of manhood as war-ready are evident in the literature of the time.”<sup>41</sup> Taken into consideration with the viewpoints expressed by *The Saturday Review*, the type of masculine representation in literature drastically affects the way people view other men and their expectations of men. The importance of imperialism created a new standard of living for men that continued to be expected of them well into the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Men are still expected to remain stoic and uphold certain gender roles that are largely outdated, such as being the main breadwinner for the family. In modern society, disabled people still struggle for equal rights and access to public spaces, along with fighting ableism and discrimination. According to the Office for National Statistics, “Disabled people aged 16 to 64 years had poorer ratings than non-disabled people on all four personal well-being measures; average anxiety levels were higher for

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<sup>39</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. “TOXIC MASCULINITY | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge.org*, 13 Nov. 2019, [www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/toxic-masculinity](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/toxic-masculinity). Accessed 12 December 2022

<sup>40</sup> Jobbins, Josephine. “Man up – the Victorian Origins of Toxic Masculinity – the Historian.” Qmul.ac.uk, 2017, [www.projects.history.qmul.ac.uk/thehistorian/2017/05/12/man-up-the-victorian-origins-of-toxic-masculinity/](http://www.projects.history.qmul.ac.uk/thehistorian/2017/05/12/man-up-the-victorian-origins-of-toxic-masculinity/). Accessed 12 December 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Jobbins, Josephine. “Man up – the Victorian Origins of Toxic Masculinity – the Historian.”



disabled people at 4.6 out of 10, compared with 3.0 out of 10 for non-disabled people (year ending June 2021).<sup>42</sup> While *A Noble Life* is quite radical in its disability representation, it highlights many of the issues that disabled men still face to this day, for example, “‘For,’ said his guardian, sadly, ‘I own I never thought of him as a young man – or as a man at all: nevertheless, he is one, and will always be.’”<sup>43</sup> Sentiments like these can influence the way readers shape their opinions on people who are different than them. Craik does the unique thing in that she has the characters be open about their ableism and emasculation of the Earl (though without using those specific terms) and confront it by having them admit they were wrong. This is unique even for today’s standards, as many books and films that include disability either ignore or are ignorant to the implications of their portrayal of disabled characters, such as the bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by Mark Haddon or the film *Music* by Sia (2021). While not perfect in its representation, *A Noble Life* does what no other novel in the Victorian era was willing to do: highlight the life of a respectable, disabled, and feminine man while highlighting his underappreciated masculinity. Representation of different identities in literature is especially important because the stories being told are often stories of real people and are not entirely fiction. Disabled people still lack access to space in society, both physical and representational, and media is sometimes the only exposure to disabled people able-bodied people will experience.

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<sup>42</sup> Office for National Statistics. “Outcomes for Disabled People in the UK - Office for National Statistics.” *Www.ons.gov.uk*, 10 Feb. 2022, [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2021](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2021). Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Craik, Dinah. “*A Noble Life*,” 376

## Conclusion

Victorian representations of disability and masculinity heavily contribute to modern day understandings of masculinity. The feminization of disabled men in Victorian literature highlights the strenuous expectations placed on men during the mid-to-late 19th-century that have unfortunately remained despite large social changes. The increased interest in sensationalist fiction in the Victorian era highlights the treatment of disabled people as ‘other’, revealing a desire to understand those who are different without putting this desire into practice. Dinah Mulock Craik’s 1866 novel, *A Noble Life*, deeply emphasizes the pressures of toxic masculinity and the disability experience. Craik gives her disabled male protagonist agency over his being and places him into a position of power, but he is able to act in such a way because of the privileged position he was born into. The Earl of Cairnforth falls into some common disability tropes, such as his existence being used to make those around him better people, but he remains a unique protagonist in that it is his life, experiences, and feelings that are at the forefront of the novel. Craik’s novels reveal an interest in portraying and appreciating the vast human experience while also serves as a foundation for disability representation in the future.

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