

Disability, Gender, and Social Identity in Modernist Literature

Bhavesh Kumar Mishra^{1,*} and Samir Khan²

¹⁻² Dr. Preeti Global University, Shivpuri - 473665, M.P. India

*Corresponding Author: Bhavesh Kumar Mishra, Email: bhaveshkumarmishra.pgu@gmail.com

Received: 08/07/2026; Revised: 20/08/2026; Accepted: 16/09/2026; Published: 30/09/2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69996/fmep.2026021>.

Abstract: Modernist literature frequently links disability with gender identity, sexuality, and social exclusion. This paper examines Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son* to explore how disability shapes interpersonal relationships and cultural identity. Hemingway portrays physical injury as a barrier to romantic fulfillment yet preserves masculine identity through Jake Barnes's emotional resilience. Joyce challenges conventional ideals of feminine perfection through Gerty MacDowell's limp, presenting disability alongside sexual desire and self-awareness. Wright employs blindness metaphorically in *Native Son* to expose racial prejudice and moral ignorance within American society. Drawing on Disability Studies, this paper argues that modernist authors simultaneously reproduce and resist stereotypes concerning disabled individuals. Rather than presenting disability merely as tragedy, these texts reveal how social attitudes construct exclusion and difference.

Keywords: Disability, Gender, Modernism, Hemingway, Joyce, Richard Wright, Blindness.

1. Introduction

Modernist literature emerged during a period of immense social transformation marked by industrialization, urbanization, technological progress, and the devastating effects of global war. These changes reshaped traditional ideas concerning identity, gender, morality, and the human body. As societies attempted to redefine concepts of normality and social order, literature increasingly focused on characters who existed outside accepted cultural standards [1]. Disability became one of the most significant literary tools through which modernist writers explored alienation, emotional instability, fractured identity, and social exclusion.

Unlike Victorian literature, which often portrayed disability as a moral punishment or symbolic defect, modernist fiction presented disability as part of ordinary human experience and social reality. Physical impairment, psychological trauma, and bodily difference were no longer limited to isolated individuals but appeared throughout modern society. Modernist writers questioned dominant assumptions regarding bodily perfection, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and racial identity [2]. Through wounded, marginalized, or psychologically fragmented characters, they exposed the instability hidden beneath the surface of modern civilization.

The early twentieth century also witnessed the development of scientific and medical discourses that attempted to classify bodies according to standards of physical and mental normality. Individuals who differed from these standards were frequently described as defective, degenerate, or socially inferior. Such ideas were reinforced through eugenics, psychiatric institutions, and cultural expectations surrounding productivity and social usefulness. Literature responded critically to these developments by examining how society constructs disability and excludes individuals who fail to meet dominant standards of normality.

Disability Studies scholars argue that disability is not merely a biological condition but a social and cultural category shaped by power, prejudice, and institutional practices. Lennard J.



Davis explains that modern societies created rigid concepts of the “normal” body through statistics, medicine, and industrial capitalism [3]. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson further argues that literature plays a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions of bodily difference and social value. Modernist texts therefore provide important insight into how disability intersects with gender, sexuality, race, and social identity.

Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Richard Wright each explore disability within distinct yet interconnected social contexts. Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* examines physical injury and emotional trauma within the disillusioned postwar generation. Joyce’s *Ulysses* portrays bodily difference and femininity through the character of Gerty MacDowell, challenging traditional assumptions regarding beauty and sexuality [4]. Wright’s *Native Son* uses blindness metaphorically to expose racial oppression and moral ignorance within American society. Together, these works reveal how disability functions not only as physical impairment but also as a social experience shaped by cultural expectations and systems of power.

Modernist literature frequently connects disability with emotional isolation and social exclusion. Characters struggle to establish meaningful relationships because their bodies or identities fail to conform to accepted standards. Jake Barnes’s war injury affects his romantic relationship with Brett Ashley, while Gerty MacDowell’s limp shapes her understanding of femininity and desirability [5]. In *Native Son*, racial discrimination operates as a form of social disability that restricts Bigger Thomas’s opportunities and humanity. These texts demonstrate that disability often emerges not from bodily difference alone but from social prejudice and institutional inequality.

At the same time, modernist writers resist portraying disabled characters solely as helpless victims [6]. Jake Barnes retains emotional dignity despite his injury, Gerty MacDowell expresses romantic and sexual agency despite her physical impairment, and Bigger Thomas actively challenges systems of racial oppression. Through these portrayals, modernist literature complicates stereotypes associated with weakness, dependency, and passivity.

This paper examines how modernist writers use disability to explore gender identity, sexuality, race, and social exclusion through a close analysis of *The Sun Also Rises*, *Ulysses*, and *Native Son*. Drawing upon Disability Studies, the paper argues that these works simultaneously reproduce and challenge cultural assumptions regarding bodily normality and human value. Through their representations of wounded bodies and fragmented identities, modernist writers expose the tensions and contradictions underlying modern social life.

2. Masculinity and Physical Injury in “*The Sun Also Rises*”

Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* presents one of the most significant modernist representations of disability and masculinity. The novel centers on Jake Barnes, a World War I veteran whose war injury leaves him sexually impotent. Although Hemingway never explicitly describes the injury in detail, its psychological and emotional consequences dominate Jake’s relationships and identity throughout the novel. Through Jake’s experiences, Hemingway examines how war trauma reshaped traditional concepts of masculinity within postwar society [7].

During the early twentieth century, masculinity was closely associated with physical strength, sexual power, emotional control, and social authority. Jake’s injury challenges these traditional ideals because it prevents him from fulfilling conventional expectations of heterosexual masculinity. His inability to consummate a romantic relationship with Lady Brett Ashley becomes a source of emotional suffering and personal frustration. However, Hemingway

complicates simplistic interpretations of disability as weakness or failure by portraying Jake as emotionally disciplined, intelligent, and socially respected.

Jake continues to work, travel, and participate actively in social life despite his impairment. He demonstrates resilience, self-control, and dignity throughout the novel. Hemingway contrasts Jake with Robert Cohn, whose jealousy, emotional instability, and insecurity represent failed masculinity more clearly than physical disability itself. Through this contrast, the novel questions whether masculinity should be defined by bodily ability or emotional character.

The relationship between Jake and Brett further illustrates the emotional impact of disability. Their love remains intense but ultimately impossible because of Jake's injury. Brett repeatedly expresses affection for Jake, yet both characters recognize that traditional romantic fulfillment is unattainable [8]. Their relationship symbolizes the emotional disillusionment of the "Lost Generation," whose experiences during World War I destroyed earlier ideals concerning love, heroism, and stability.

Alcohol consumption, travel, and social entertainment dominate the lives of Hemingway's characters, yet these activities fail to resolve their emotional emptiness. Beneath the glamorous surface of cafés, parties, and bullfights lies profound psychological alienation and loneliness. Jake's disability therefore reflects broader cultural trauma rather than isolated personal tragedy [9]. His wounded body symbolizes the moral and emotional fragmentation of postwar modern society.

From a Disability Studies perspective, Hemingway's portrayal remains complex. On one hand, the novel associates disability with loss, limitation, and emotional suffering. Jake's injury prevents him from achieving conventional romantic fulfillment and reinforces his sense of isolation. On the other hand, Hemingway avoids reducing Jake to helpless victimhood. Jake maintains personal dignity and emotional intelligence despite his physical impairment. His masculinity is reconstructed through endurance, restraint, and self-awareness rather than sexual dominance [10].

The novel also critiques social expectations surrounding male identity. Jake suffers not only because of his injury itself but because society defines masculinity through physical and sexual capability. Hemingway reveals how rigid gender expectations intensify emotional pain and create feelings of inadequacy [11]. Disability therefore becomes socially constructed through cultural ideas regarding bodily normality and masculine performance.

Ultimately, *The Sun Also Rises* transforms physical injury into a broader symbol of postwar disillusionment and emotional fragmentation. Jake Barnes represents a generation psychologically wounded by violence and uncertainty. Through his experiences, Hemingway challenges traditional definitions of masculinity while exposing the emotional consequences of modern war and social instability.

3. Femininity and Bodily Difference in "Ulysses"

James Joyce's *Ulysses* explores the relationship between disability, femininity, sexuality, and social identity through the character of Gerty MacDowell in the "Nausicaa" episode. Gerty's limp distinguishes her physically from idealized standards of feminine beauty, yet Joyce refuses to portray her as emotionally passive or socially invisible. Instead, he presents disability as part of ordinary human experience while simultaneously critiquing cultural expectations imposed upon women in modern society [12].

During the early twentieth century, femininity was strongly associated with bodily perfection, beauty, purity, and domestic virtue. Women whose bodies deviated from these ideals

were frequently viewed as undesirable, dependent, or socially inferior. Gerty remains highly conscious of these expectations and worries about how others perceive her physical impairment. Her awareness reflects broader social pressures that define female value according to appearance and bodily conformity.

Despite these anxieties, Joyce portrays Gerty as emotionally expressive, imaginative, and sexually aware. Throughout the episode, she engages in romantic fantasies and consciously participates in her interaction with Leopold Bloom [13]. Rather than presenting disabled women as passive or asexual, Joyce emphasizes Gerty's desire, self-awareness, and emotional agency. This representation challenges stereotypes that exclude disabled women from narratives of romance and sexuality.

Joyce also critiques the influence of consumer culture and sentimental literature upon female identity. Gerty models herself according to popular advertisements, magazines, and romantic ideals circulating within modern urban culture. Her self-image is shaped by unrealistic standards of beauty and femininity that encourage women to perform socially constructed roles [14]. Her limp therefore symbolizes not only physical difference but also resistance to impossible cultural expectations regarding female perfection.

The "Nausicaa" episode further complicates the relationship between disability and visibility. Gerty desires recognition, admiration, and emotional connection, yet she also fears judgment and rejection because of her bodily difference. Joyce captures the tension between public appearance and private insecurity that shapes modern female identity. Disability becomes intertwined with broader concerns regarding self-presentation, social acceptance, and emotional vulnerability.

From a Disability Studies perspective, Joyce's portrayal of Gerty is both progressive and contradictory. While the novel humanizes Gerty and grants her emotional complexity, it also risks objectifying her through Bloom's voyeuristic perspective. Nevertheless, Joyce destabilizes traditional assumptions concerning beauty and desirability by portraying a disabled woman as sexually expressive and emotionally sophisticated [15].

Importantly, Gerty's disability does not define her entire identity. She exists not merely as a symbol of bodily deficiency but as a multidimensional individual shaped by dreams, emotions, social pressures, and personal desires. Joyce thereby rejects simplistic representations of disabled women as tragic or socially useless figures.

Ultimately, Ulysses uses bodily difference to examine the complex relationship between femininity, sexuality, and social identity within modern urban life. Through Gerty MacDowell, Joyce challenges rigid standards of beauty and exposes the cultural forces that shape female self-perception. Disability becomes not simply a physical condition but a lens through which broader anxieties regarding gender and social acceptance are explored.

4. Blindness and Racial Oppression in "Native Son"

Richard Wright's *Native Son* employs blindness as both a literal and symbolic device to examine racial oppression, social injustice, and moral ignorance within American society. Through the blind character Mrs. Dalton and the experiences of Bigger Thomas, Wright demonstrates how racism functions as a system of social blindness that prevents individuals from recognizing the humanity and suffering of others. Disability in the novel therefore becomes closely connected with structures of racial power and exclusion.

Mrs. Dalton's blindness symbolizes the inability of white society to perceive the realities of Black oppression. Although she expresses sympathy toward African Americans and donates money to charitable causes, she remains unaware of the systemic inequalities that shape Bigger

Thomas's life. Her physical blindness reflects a broader moral blindness embedded within American social institutions. Wright suggests that racism persists not only through hatred and violence but also through ignorance, denial, and emotional distance.

Bigger himself experiences a different form of social invisibility. Living within conditions of poverty, surveillance, and racial discrimination, he is denied opportunities for dignity, self-expression, and personal freedom. Society perceives him primarily through racial stereotypes rather than as a complete human being. In this sense, racism functions as a disabling force that restricts identity, mobility, and social participation.

The novel repeatedly emphasizes fear and misunderstanding between racial groups. White characters project their anxieties onto Bigger without attempting to understand the conditions shaping his behavior. Bigger likewise struggles to understand his own emotional responses within a society structured by racial violence and exclusion. Blindness therefore becomes reciprocal: both oppressor and oppressed remain trapped within distorted social perceptions created by systemic racism.

Wright also draws upon African American literary traditions, particularly the figure of the rebellious "badman" who resists social domination. Bigger attempts to challenge oppressive structures through violence and defiance, yet his actions ultimately reinforce the fears and stereotypes imposed upon him by white society. The novel portrays racial oppression as psychologically destructive, producing anger, alienation, and emotional fragmentation.

From a Disability Studies perspective, *Native Son* demonstrates how disability metaphors can expose institutional inequality and cultural prejudice. Wright uses blindness not to mock disabled individuals but to critique social systems incapable of empathy and justice. At the same time, the metaphorical use of blindness remains complex because it risks associating disability with ignorance or moral failure. Nevertheless, Wright redirects attention away from individual impairment toward collective social dysfunction.

The novel also reveals how modern society defines certain populations as dangerous, defective, or inferior. Bigger's criminalization reflects broader systems of racial classification and exclusion similar to those historically imposed upon disabled individuals. Wright thereby connects racial oppression with other forms of social marginalization and institutional control.

Ultimately, *Native Son* transforms blindness into a powerful critique of American racism and moral hypocrisy. Wright demonstrates that social injustice persists because societies refuse to confront their own violence and inequality. Disability becomes both metaphor and social reality through which the novel exposes the emotional and political consequences of systemic oppression.

5. Disability, Desire, and Social Exclusion

Modernist literature frequently connects disability with emotional isolation, social exclusion, and struggles for human recognition. Writers such as Hemingway, Joyce, and Wright portray characters whose bodily differences or marginalized identities complicate their relationships with society and with other individuals. Through these portrayals, modernist fiction reveals how disability is shaped not only by physical impairment but also by cultural prejudice, institutional power, and social expectations.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes experiences emotional isolation because his war injury prevents him from fulfilling conventional expectations of masculinity and romantic intimacy. His relationship with Brett Ashley remains emotionally meaningful yet permanently incomplete. Jake's suffering emerges not solely from physical impairment but from social definitions of male identity that equate masculinity with sexual performance and bodily

capability. Hemingway therefore demonstrates how society transforms bodily injury into emotional and social exclusion.

Similarly, Gerty MacDowell in *Ulysses* worries that her limp reduces her value within a culture obsessed with feminine beauty and physical perfection. She fears judgment and rejection because her body differs from dominant standards of attractiveness. Yet Joyce also portrays Gerty as emotionally expressive and sexually confident, thereby challenging assumptions that disabled women are passive or undesirable. Her experiences reveal how femininity itself is socially constructed through restrictive ideals of bodily appearance and behavior.

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas experiences social exclusion through racial oppression rather than physical impairment. Poverty, segregation, surveillance, and discrimination restrict his opportunities and isolate him from meaningful participation within society. Wright suggests that racism functions as a disabling social force by denying individuals dignity, freedom, and recognition. Bigger's alienation demonstrates how social systems can produce forms of exclusion similar to those historically associated with disability.

Disability Studies scholars argue that disability often results from social barriers rather than bodily conditions alone. Architectural structures, cultural attitudes, economic inequality, and institutional prejudice all contribute to exclusion and marginalization. Modernist literature reflects this understanding by revealing how societies define certain individuals as abnormal, undesirable, or dangerous according to shifting cultural standards.

At the same time, these modernist texts resist reducing marginalized characters to helpless victims. Jake Barnes retains dignity and emotional resilience despite his injury. Gerty MacDowell expresses desire and self-awareness despite social judgment. Bigger Thomas actively resists systems of racial domination even though his rebellion ultimately ends in tragedy. These portrayals complicate stereotypes linking disability with passivity, weakness, or dependency.

Modernist writers also expose the instability of normality itself. Characters who appear socially successful often display emotional emptiness, moral blindness, or psychological fragmentation equal to or greater than those officially labeled abnormal. Disability therefore becomes a lens through which modernist literature critiques broader social anxieties regarding identity, power, and belonging.

Ultimately, modernist fiction transforms disability into a central framework for examining exclusion, desire, identity, and human vulnerability. Hemingway, Joyce, and Wright demonstrate that bodily difference acquires meaning through cultural attitudes and institutional structures rather than biological conditions alone. Their works challenge rigid definitions of normality while revealing the emotional consequences of societies built upon inequality, prejudice, and social fragmentation.

6. Conclusion

Modernist literature frequently employs disability to interrogate gender roles, sexuality, and social identity. Hemingway, Joyce, and Wright portray disability not simply as physical impairment but as a condition shaped by cultural expectations and social prejudice.

Jake Barnes's injury challenges dominant ideals of masculinity, Gerty MacDowell's limp complicates conventional femininity, and Mrs. Dalton's blindness exposes racial injustice. These writers demonstrate that disability is inseparable from broader systems of power and identity formation.

Although modernist texts sometimes rely upon metaphorical representations that risk reinforcing stereotypes, they also humanize disabled characters and challenge rigid definitions of

normality. Through their exploration of wounded bodies and fragmented identities, modernist writers expose the instability of modern social values and expand literary understandings of human difference.

Acknowledgment: Not Applicable.

Funding Statement: The author(s) received no specific funding for this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study

References

- [1] Anesko and Michael, "The Torments of Spring: Jake Barnes's Phantom Limb in *The Sun Also Rises*," *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 52–69, 2015.
- [2] Battye and Louis, "The Chatterley Syndrome." *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, Edited by Paul Hunt, Chapman, 1966.
- [3] Bayindir and Turgay, "War-Broken Masculinities and the Search for Healing in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Home to Harlem*," *Literatures of War*, Edited by Richard Pine and Eve Patten, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 132–46, 2008.
- [4] Belling and Catherine, "Begin with a Text: Teaching the Poetics of Medicine," *Journal of Medical Humanities*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 481-91, 2013.
- [5] Bilbija and Marina, "Diaspora Doubtful: Illegible Diasporic Subjects in Claude McKay's *Banjo* and Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*," *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 82, no. 4, pp. 98–120, 2017.
- [6] Black and Ezekiel, "Mouthlessness and Ineffability in World War I Poetry and *The Waste Land*," *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 25, pp 1-17, 2013.
- [7] Booth and J. Howard, "Claude McKay in Britain: Race, Sexuality and Poetry," *Modernism and Race*, edited by Len Platt, Cambridge University Press, pp. 137–55, 2011.
- [8] Fifield and Peter, "Sensory Intensity and Illness in Lawrence," *Modernism and Physical Illness: Sick Books*. Oxford UP, August 20, 2020.
- [9] Oxford Scholarship Online. Date Accessed 12 Oct. 2020.
- [10] Fore and Dana, "Life Unworthy of Life? Masculinity, Disability, and Guilt in *The Sun Also Rises*," *The Hemingway Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 74-91, 2007.
- [11] Frank and Arthur, "Being a Good Story: Humanities as Therapeutic Practice," *Health Humanities Reader*, pp.13-25, 2014.
- [12] Teegala Namdev Goud and N. Ramana Reddy, "A Machine Learning Approach for Detecting Fraudulent Job Postings in Online Recruitment Platforms," *JSIHS*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 14–28, 2025.
- [13] Garden and Rebecca, "Who Speaks for Whom? Health Humanities and the Ethics of Representation," *Medical Humanities*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp.77-80, 2015.
- [14] C.L. Gibson, "Caring for American Wounded in France," *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. 63, no.5, pp. 594-607, 1918.
- [15] Guangju Li, "E-Learning Intelligence Model with Artificial Intelligence to Improve Learning Performance of Students," *JCAI*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 14–26, 2023.