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Revising Gerty MacDowell's Identity and Agency: An Intersectional Feminist Disability Perspective

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Abstract: Gerty MacDowell's initial, albeit brief, appearance in James Joyce's *Ulysses* has sparked debates regarding her identity and agency. In the critical literature, there are interpretations that characterize Gerty as a woman and disabled person whose actions conform to patriarchal beauty standards that objectify her. This paper argues for revising such readings by applying an intersectional feminist disability perspective attuned to the interconnections between her womanhood and disability. Rather than positing Gerty's identities as inherently conflicting, I illustrate how her disability and feminine social position co-constitute and transform one another. Her self-care practices aimed at securing a husband, though partly conforming to norms, also foster confidence and counter pervasive cultural assumptions of disabled women as ugly, useless, and asexual. Gerty's exhibition of sexual desire and pursuit of pleasure likewise contest views of disabled women as unsuitable for romance or unable to be agentic sexual subjects. Furthermore, conceptualizing agency beyond neoliberal notions of rational autonomy acting against all constraints upholds Gerty's agentic power. She makes strategic use of available discourses and resources to expand her precarious options given material and ideological limitations. Overall, analyzing Gerty's intersectional experience denaturalizes the reductive models of identity and agency that have dominated *Ulysses* criticism. Applying fresh perspectives opens new symbolic interpretations of embodied identity and sexuality.

Keywords: James Joyce; Gerty MacDowell; disability; women; agency; sexual agency; intersectionality

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1. Introduction

According to Suzette Henke, Gerty MacDowell is the "second most prominent female in Ulysses" (Henke 1982, p. 132), after the 'more flamboyant' Molly Bloom. Gerty's initial, albeit brief, appearance occurs in 'Wandering Rocks', where she is walking slowly while carrying her father's lino letters (*U.* 10, 1270). Three episodes later, in 'Nausicaa', Gerty takes center stage in the narrative. In a narrative style described by Joyce himself in a letter to Frank Budgen as "namby-pamby jammy marmaladey drawersy" (Joyce 1975, p. 246), a beautiful teenage girl[1] appears on the beach with her two female friends and three children in their care. We are then immersed in her thoughts and daydreams about men, love, beauty, and fashion. Suddenly, her gaze meets that of Leopold Bloom, and a flirtation begins, culminating in both experiencing an orgasm. Initially, she appears to be an ordinary woman of her age and time, who feels pleasure and desires to love and be loved. However, suddenly the narration shifts to Bloom, and we discover that Gerty is lame. Immediately, our conception of Gerty changes, and her entire character is seen in a different light.

The traditional critical trajectory of Gerty sees her as a product of patriarchal discourse, conforming to Western capitalist beauty standards and objectified by the male gaze (Kao 2023; Froula 1996; Henke 1982). She is the paradigmatic example of a woman oppressed by the patriarchal societal system that prevents her from being an autonomous individual. However, Gerty's disability complicates this perspective on the oppression. These interpretations judge that her lameness makes her actively seek out this oppression, "whose efforts to normalize her external appearance fall in accordance with hegemonic ideals" (Cormier 2008, p. 210). Gerty's beautification practices, serve to normalize her appearance so she

can fit into society and also be the object of the male gaze. This apparent willingness to accept these norms makes her appear unreflective and superficial. Yet, given her disability, she is also seen as a poor girl who must fit and conform in order to survive. With her socio-economic background—"[h]ad kind fate but willed her to be born a gentlewoman of high degree in her own right and had she only received the benefit of a good education" (*U.* 13, 99–100)[2]—some scholars such as Nemecek, following Jauchen's arguments, say that prostitution seems a possible option in Gerty's life (Nemecek 2010, p. 193)[3]. Gerty's self-care is then seen as a result of her being disabled. According to these readings, she is not allowed to act as both a woman and a disabled person.

The aim of this paper is to propose a reading of Gerty as an agentic subject, whose identities as a woman and as a disabled person work together and do not annul each other. In the spirit of scholars such as Angela Lea Nemecek and Dominika Bednarska, I consider that her disability, taken not as a disadvantage but as another way of being-in-the-world, does not compete with being a woman, nor invalidate what it means to have, feel, and act as a female body. Furthermore, being a woman and being interested in beauty routines and fashion in order to find a husband—which might be seen as objectifying and oppressive—are, for Gerty, neither of those. I argue that she still has agentic power under patriarchal circumstances. To develop the argument, I divide the paper into three sections. The first addresses what I have called the traditional readings of Gerty. In these readings, we find that Gerty is conceived as a virginal, sentimental, disabled woman who is subjected to the patriarchal norms and the stigmatizing gaze of her society. This subjection prevents her from being an agentic individual. In the second section, I revisit interpretations of Gerty that preserve her agency, not by portraying her as a rebel against the system, but by showing how she integrates and embraces both her identities as a woman and as a disabled person. Finally, in the last section, I present a Gerty who is an agentic individual in her own right, by putting into dialogue her identities as a woman and as a disabled person.

2. Conflicting Identities: Gerty as the Virginal Sentimental Disabled Woman

In Gerty's character, we can identify a conflictual dialectical relation between her identities as a woman and a disabled person. Traditional readings have predominantly characterized this relation as virginal and sentimental. In the first place, Gerty is associated with the image of a virginal woman. The association is easy to establish, given that her figure is portrayed as astonishingly beautiful, graceful, pure, and delicate:

> [. . .] a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood [. . .] Her figure was slight and graceful, inclining even to fragility [. . .] The waxen pallor of her face was almost spiritual in its ivorylike purity though her rosebud mouth was a genuine Cupid's bow, Greekely perfect. Her hands were of finely veined alabaster with tapering fingers and as white as lemonjuice [. . .] There was as an innate refinement, a languid queenly hauteur about Gerty which was unmistakably evidenced in her delicate hands and higharched instep. (*U.* 13, 81–98)

Additionally, the scene takes place near a church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, where a recitation of the litanies to Mary is occurring during a religious ceremony:

> [O]n the quiet church whence there streamed forth at times upon the stillness the voice of prayer to her who is in her pure radiance a beacon ever to the stormtossed heart of man, Mary, star of the sea. [. . .] Queen of angels, queen of patriarchs, queen of prophets, of all saints, they prayed, queen of the most holy rosary. (*U.* 13, 6–8, 489–90)

Though there have recently been readings of the virginal, attractive, and lovable aspect of Gerty as empowering—such as Pei-Wen Clio Kao's—traditionally, this representation of Gerty as virginal aligns with readings where she is portrayed as a passive object of the male gaze. Similar to the Virgin Mary, she accepts the other without hesitation, without qualms. Both Gerty and Mary do not pose resistance to the gaze of the other, be it God or

Bloom. Gerty is compliant as Mary was. Consequently, Gerty's desires become subject to the other, and in this interpretation, she lacks sexual agency.

Suzanne Henke takes this analysis further by claiming that Joyce is parodying his character to show how Gerty gives up her sexual agency "in the service to the phallic fantasy of courtly love" (Henke 2004–2005, p. 90). For Henke, Gerty is not only an object of the male gaze but is actively participating in this dynamic. At the beginning of Henke's influential paper 'Gerty MacDowell: Joyce's Sentimental Heroine', she asks:

> Does Joyce intend to ridicule his character for playing the seductive nymph? Or is he presenting her as the pathetic victim of social and religious enculturation—as a naïve young woman trying to fend off the pressures of adult sexuality by adopting the mental pose of a chaste and virginal nun? (Henke 1982, p. 132)

In both scenarios—whether Joyce ridicules Gerty or presents her as a victim—the phrasing of the questions suggests that Gerty becomes the agent of her own ridicule or victimhood, either by 'playing the seductive nymph' or by 'adopting the mental pose of a chaste and virginal nun.' In this sense, Gerty would intertwine features of the passive virgin with her participation in the objectification imposed by the male construction and representation of courtly love.[4]

This participation is enacted by Gerty's almost obsessive interest in beautification practices and fashion trends. Gerty manipulates her body in a way that aligns with her male peers' expectations of femininity. Her body is a commodity that needs to be taken care of to be appealing and transactable: "[Gerty] as a self-conscious image manipulator who views herself as a commodity that must be carefully packaged and advertised, in accordance with a media representation of what is 'feminine', in order to attract a male consumer" (Leonard 1991, p. 4). Her femininity is dependent on the creams and make-up she possesses and wears. In her fantasies, she is sure that if she uses all the products offered by Madame Verity and Woman Beautiful, she will surely attract the man of her dreams (Henke 1982):

> Time was when those brows were not so silkily seductive. It was Madame Vera Verity, directress of the Woman Beautiful page of the Princess Novelette, who had first advised her to try eyebrowleine which gave that haunting expression to the eyes, so becoming in leaders of fashion, and she had never regretted it'. (*U.* 13, 109–13)

Also, she is aware that the way she dresses, which is highly influenced by fashion magazines, determines how others perceive her:

> Gerty was dressed simply but with the instinctive taste of a votary of Dame Fashion for she felt that there was just a might that he might be out. A neat blouse of electric blue selftinted by dolly dyes (because it was expected in the Lady's Pictorial that electric blue would be worn) [. . .] She did it up all by herself and what joy was hers when she tried it on then, smiling at the lovely reflection which the mirror gave back to her! And when she put it on the water jug to keep the shape she knew that that would take the shine out of some people she knew. (*U.* 13, 148–64)

Conventional interpretations of Gerty tend to characterize her as frivolous, shallow, and sentimental due to her interests. However, the picture becomes more complicated because these attributes are more salient in Gerty's character given that she has a physical disability. According to these traditional readings, her engagement with various products and rituals stems from a necessity to conceal her disability. From a critical standpoint, Gerty is viewed as lacking the strength to accept her disability and to resist entering the cycles of capitalist and male objectification. She is not only perceived as a failed woman, succumbing to systemic oppression, but also as a failed disabled person for not embracing her perceived 'shortcoming.' As Garland-Thomson mentions, society's perceptions of disabled women often depict them as "asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent,

unattractive—as generally removed from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty" (Garland-Thomson 2013, p. 345). Gerty's active participation in beautification practices and fashion consumerism, coupled with her disability, challenges and contradicts this prevalent cultural stereotype of disabled women. The paradox arises: how can she experience desire and sexual pleasure? According to these traditional readings, Gerty's capacity for desire and pleasure is contingent upon her being an object of desire for Bloom's phallic gaze, achievable only by concealing her disability.

Gerty then becomes emblematic of both bodily and character failure. Her true desire is for a father figure "who will heal her wounded spirit by erasing the traces of limping inadequacy" (Henke 2004–2005, p. 89). Essentially, she yearns for someone to take care of her, embodying the image of a dependent woman that contradicts the modern ideal of a self-sufficient subject. Henke argues that Gerty constructs an imaginative parody of sentimental romance to cope with the harsh reality of her life as a woman with a disability facing bleak prospects for marriage. Her disability is perceived as something she must escape from—both through fantasizing in her daydreams and by concealing it in her daily life.[5]

3. Harmonious Identities: Gerty as a Powerful Disabled Woman

The interpretations of Gerty presented earlier may reflect a failure to grasp how her identities are interconnected and mutually influence one another. Gerty is not simply a woman on one hand and disabled on the other, as if one identity negates the other; instead, she embodies both identities simultaneously. This traditional misinterpretation may have arisen because, in Western culture, we tend to view minorities through the lens of a singular identity—until recently, with the emergence of intersectionality studies (Houh 2021). In this context, we often negate the capacity of disabled individuals to experience sexual desire and pleasure. There is a prejudice that a disabled woman cannot fully be a woman experiencing pleasure due to her body's malfunction, even when her disability is unrelated to her sexual agency. In the words of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "disabled women often encounter what Harlan Hahn has called 'asexual objectification', the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people" (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 25). Moreover, Garland-Thomson continues, people often think that a beautiful woman with a disability represents a "remarkable and lamentable contradiction" (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 25). Disabled women are then seen as asexual and unfeminine, which leads to social invisibility. In the traditional readings of Gerty, we recognize these judgments about her femininity and sexual agency.

Another reason for the misreading of Gerty's identity may be attributed to the structure of the episode in which Gerty's limp only becomes apparent after both Gerty and Bloom have reached the climax of their encounter: "She drew herself up to her full height [. . .] She walked with a certain quiet dignity characteristic of her but with care and very slowly because—because Gerty MacDowell was. . . Tight boots? No. She's lame! O!" (*U.* 13, 762, 769–71). We can interpret this structural choice as suggesting that Joyce intended for Gerty to conceal her condition to arouse Bloom, assuming her awareness of her disadvantageous disability. Some scholars, like Garland-Thomson and more recently Reynolds and Silvers (2017), argue that feminist theories often overlook disability as an integral part of women's identities. Garland-Thomson observes that feminist discussions frequently omit disability from issues deeply interconnected with it, such as reproductive technology, bodily differences, specific forms of oppression, ethics of care, and subjectivity construction: "Repeatedly, feminist issues that are intricately entangled with disability (. . .) are discussed without any reference to disability" (Garland-Thomson 2013, p. 333).

Various scholars have engaged with these readings and proposed that adopting a perspective from feminist disability studies could offer insightful new interpretations of Gerty and her character's symbolism. Scholars like Bednarska, Nemecek, and Kao argue that Gerty's disability should not be perceived as nullifying her agency, especially her sexual agency. Bednarska contends that in "Nausicaa," Joyce introduces what she terms a 'cripped erotic': "For me, a "cripped erotic" encompasses but expands beyond particular

bodies or impairments, or a sense of disabled identity, to a way of understanding the mind, the body, desire, and the senses" (Bednarska 2011, p. 73). Essentially, Joyce portrays in Gerty an alternative erotic sensibility that transcends the normative experience of sexuality. Furthermore, Bednarska sees in Gerty a transformation of 'disability' into 'ability', in the sense that she is able to perform as non-disabled and partially conform to societal norms. However, her performance and conformity do not mean that she is without agency. On the contrary, given her life situation, she must perform more than a non-disabled person in order not to be invisible. She is aware of her disability—"for that one shortcoming she knew she need fear no competition" (*U.* 13, 650)—and therefore decides to engage with the gendered normative dynamic to safeguard her visibility in society. At the same time, Bednarska emphasizes that Gerty's conformity to "the economy of gendered expression" calls into question its normativity, given that she, as a disabled woman, even if she over-performs, will never fully display normative femininity: "This is precisely because that economy is built upon an idealized able body to which they do not have access and through which they can never fully perform" (Bednarska 2011, p. 79). This observation is crucial because Gerty symbolizes a comprehensive critique of the inadequacy of these norms in understanding gender and agency.

Nemecek, in the same spirit, stresses that Gerty is another instance throughout the novel in which Joyce challenges and revises "models of identity and social relations that rely on normative bodies" (Nemecek 2010, p. 173). One of the other important instances is that of the blind stripling, who makes his first appearance in 'Lestrygonians': "A blind stripling stood tapping the curbstone with his slender cane. No tram in sight. Wants to cross" (*U.* 8, 1075–76).[6] Nemecek's primary focus is to illustrate that Gerty's disability serves as a potent resistance to eugenic ideologies. Nemecek advocates for recognizing Gerty's identity as a woman with a disability, asserting its transformative social power. This power is shown by changing the interpretation of Gerty's limp from a limitation on her agency to an alternative one in which Gerty's agency defies gender norms and the way disabled women are required to express their sexuality (Nemecek 2010). Nemecek argues that Gerty is aware of her disability and the disadvantages that it entails; nevertheless, she embraces it and even "makes central to her identity the very part of her self that would earn her pity or contempt in the world at large" (Nemecek 2010, p. 180). For example, when Gerty praises her ankle and limbs—"Her well turned ankle displayed its perfect proportions beneath her skirt and just the proper amount and no more of her shapely limbs encased in finespun hose with high spliced heels and wide garter tops" (*U.* 13, 168–70)—they turn out to be not only Bloom's object of desire and arousal but also her mechanism to get aroused.

Finally, Kao's article portrays Gerty as a resilient disabled woman whose "femininity and disability are transformed into a redeeming power to soothe and uplift Leopold Bloom" (Kao 2023, p. 95). According to this interpretation, Gerty is not merely an object of desire; rather, she becomes the subject whose agency saves Bloom. Kao argues against interpreting Gerty's virginal features as indicators of passivity. Instead, these characteristics should be viewed as safeguarding her individuality and capacity for desire. Furthermore, they highlight her ability to influence male consciousness and challenge the patriarchal system. In this reading, it is not Gerty, the poor, disadvantaged, woman with a disability who finds safety in the father–lover–husband figure of Bloom; quite the opposite, she becomes the one who saves the poor Bloom: "He was in deep mourning, she could see that, and the story of a haunting sorrow was written on his face" (*U.* 13, 421–22).

These novel interpretations view Gerty not only as a woman but as someone whose disability shapes her entire identity. This perspective becomes evident when we analyze the character through the lens of feminist disability studies. The social imaginary regarding people with disabilities, as mentioned earlier, often assumes they cannot experience sexual desires or pleasure. They are often pitied, perceived as unable to navigate the world in the same way as able-bodied individuals. However, this approach to disability is inadequate. Garland-Thomson, following Eve Sedgwick, contends that by incorporating disability into our understanding, we introduce a universalizing view that replaces a minoritizing

perspective. This broader perspective enables us to perceive gender, sexuality, identity, embodiment, community, progress, and perfection in alternative and more comprehensive ways (Garland-Thomson 2013, p. 336). Garland-Thomson then suggests that by focusing on disability in feminist studies, we denaturalize the social imaginary, challenging the notion that being disabled implies that something is inherently wrong with the person.

By examining Gerty from a feminist disability studies perspective, we can discover that disability "both intensifies and attenuates the cultural scripts of femininity" (Garland-Thomson 2013, p. 245). While it may be true that disabled women might encounter challenges in performing the full mandates prescribed to their gender by society, such as bearing and raising children, this should not become the basis for society to deny an ability to desire and pursue such aspirations. Furthermore, Gerty's story illustrates that women are not obligated to desire motherhood; they can continue embracing their womanhood while aspiring to have a partner without necessarily desiring children:

> [E]very morning they would both have brekky, simple but perfectly served, for their own two selves and before he went out to business, he would give his dear little wifey a good hearty hug and gaze for a moment deep down into her eyes. (*U.* 13, 239–42)

In essence, the traditional readings of Gerty perpetuate limiting stereotypes about disabled women, confining them within a narrow understanding of femininity. However, adopting a feminist disability studies lens broadens our comprehension, recognizing the diverse and nuanced ways in which disabled women can experience desire, pleasure, and define their own paths to womanhood beyond societal expectations.

4. Recovering Gerty's Agency

In the last section, I embrace the arguments of what I call novel readings of Gerty, in which her two identities are reconciled, and her agency—especially her sexual agency—is ensured to some extent. In this section, I show how Gerty is preserved as an agentic individual. While Gerty is clearly interested in beautification routines and fashion trends, she remains critical of them, surpassing the societal expectations imposed on women during her time—such as the obligation to have children—by divorcing sexuality from reproduction, perhaps influenced also by the psychological ideology of erotic romances. Throughout the initial part of the episode, various instances reveal that Gerty is engaged in thought or introspection:

> Gerty MacDowell who was seated near her companions, lost in thought, gazing far away into the distance [. . .] (*U.* 13, 70–80).

> Over and over had she told herself as she mused by the dying embers in a brown study without the lamp because she hated two lights or oftentimes gazing out of the window dreamily by the hour at the rain failing on the rusty bucket, thinking. (*U.* 13, 293–97)

> And, Gerty, rapt in thought, scarce saw or heard her companions or the twins [. . .] (*U.* 13, 304–5).

The choice of words is significant, as they extend beyond mere daydreaming or fantasizing; the text explicitly notes that she is thinking and reflecting. Furthermore, as previously highlighted, she does not envision herself with children and shows limited enthusiasm for tending to the children who are with them. From the outset, Gerty is not entirely submissive to the oppressive societal system; she rebels to some extent.

At the same time, we may question why it is deemed inappropriate for a woman to embrace her 'femininity' and take care of herself. While acknowledging that there should be limits and that prioritizing physical well-being should not overshadow other aspects of our lives, we can argue that "[s]elf-esteem, including appreciative regard for one's own appearance, is healthy. Indeed, such narcissistic satisfaction may be necessary to avoid self-effacement, desexualization, and craven mimicry of faddish beauty ideal" (Meyers 2002,

p. 101). Gerty, by accepting Western aesthetic norms and routines, may not be succumbing to oppression by a societal system. Instead, she could be pursuing a personal desire to care for herself. Finding satisfaction in her beautiful reflection in the mirror contributes to her confidence and provides strength to navigate her life.

> She wore a coquettish little love of a hat of wideleaved nigger straw contrast trimmed with an underbrim of eggblue chenille and at the side a butterfly bow of silk to tone. [. . .] She did it up all by herself and what joy was hers when she tried it on then, smiling at the lovely reflection which the mirror gave back to her! And when she put it on the water jug to keep the shape she knew that that would take the shine out of some people she knew. (*U.* 13, 148–64)

In addition, in Gerty's case, taking care of herself becomes a matter of survival; if she does not secure a husband soon, she risks the possibility of ending up alone or even worse as a prostitute. Although, from a contemporary standpoint, marriage and taking care of herself to secure marriage might be perceived as a voluntary acceptance of capitalist patriarchal oppression, Gerty perceives these as her only viable options. This is particularly true considering her physical disability, which in her patriarchal, eugenic, ableist society is regarded as a significant disadvantage. Notably, it is Bloom who tells us of Gerty's lameness and passes judgment on her disability, not Gerty herself. Gerty refuses to let her disability prevent her from finding a man. She neither conceals it nor allows it to define her. In fact, she exploits it by showcasing her legs and feet as points of attraction. Her sexual agency is not overshadowed by her disability.

When considering agency, the initial thought that often arises is its association with the ability to act in the world without any constraints. Those who suffer any kind of constraints may find their agency limited or even annulled, preventing the external manifestation of their internal desires. Such limitations may originate from both internal and external sources. For instance, psychoanalysis suggests that our capacity to reason can be undermined by instinctual drives, emphasizing the need to make sense of or liberate ourselves from these drives (Frie 2008). Similarly, feminist theories have aimed to liberate women from external structural oppression that hinders them from achieving their goals, fulfilling their desires, and being granted the basic human rights. In these disciplines, the accepted notion of agency is one that is "associated with intentionality, (problem-directed) coping behavior, resilience, competency, assertiveness, mastery, autonomy, and self-efficacy. [. . .] It is expected to resist toxic ideologies and circumstances and to transcend harmful domination by others" (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2021, p. 379). However, it is essential to recognize that this form of agency is rooted in a neoliberal and economic vision of human beings as capable of individual mastery and self-sufficiency (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2021). Consequently, there is an interest in eliminating all kinds of constraints that impede the development of this mastery and sufficiency.

From this perspective of agency, Gerty is perceived as unable to exercise her agency fully. She appears entirely subject to the social norms imposed on her as a woman and a disabled person in early-twentieth-century Ireland. For her, it would be impossible to achieve the individual mastery and self-sufficiency that would allow her to have real intentionality in her actions—to be resilient, competent, assertive, autonomous, etc. However, an alternative understanding of agency—one that safeguards Gerty's agency—emerges from the social behaviorism perspective proposed by Steven Hitlin and Glen H. Elder. They argue that "[p]eople's actions do not occur in a vacuum" (Hitlin and Elder 2007, p. 175). Bearing this in mind, they proceed to propose four analytical forms of agency: existential, pragmatic, identity, and life-course. The third type, identity agency, is particularly relevant for analyzing Gerty's agency. According to the authors, our internalized identities motivate our actions, emphasizing that agency is intricately linked to our position in the world. In our situational context, commitments to others and ourselves guide our actions, potentially reproducing social structures.

This can happen because we are often determined by the society we live in, or because we simply want "to play the part well". This habitual agency is born from our sense of

autonomy, even though we are just following social norms. We accept these commitments because we have the ability to adapt and to think about long-term goals (Hitlin and Elder 2007). The choices we make within societal norms might currently constrain us, but in the long term, they can lead to increased freedom of action. Not all our behaviors are necessarily resistant, liberating, or world-changing, as the authors note: "Behaviors that are notably conforming, stabilizing, accommodating, or even disempowering still form part of the many modalities that agentic engagement with one's environment may take" (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2021, p. 380).

In Gerty's case, her agency manifests in her decision to adopt the Western aesthetic norms of her time as a means of survival, given her awareness of her disability. While she had the option to choose otherwise, she recognized the potentially life-threatening consequences of not adhering to those norms. Adapting her behavior becomes a strategic choice for a better future—one that may afford her more freedom to act in other ways. Even though her conformity to societal norms does not challenge the discourse that women are oppressed by beauty standards, this behavior is transformative precisely because she is a disabled woman. The message she conveys is that her disability does not equate to ailment, suffering, disadvantage, poverty, or misfortune. On the contrary, she takes pride in it and makes no effort to conceal it. Additionally, Joyce portrays Gerty as far from incapable or useless. She possesses practical skills, such as baking, and would excel as a homemaker:

> She would care for him with creature comforts too for Gerty was womanly wise and knew that a mere man liked that feeling of hominess. Her griddlecakes done to a goldenbrown hue and queen Ann's pudding of delightful creaminess had won golden opinions from all because she had lucky hand also for lightning a fire, dredge in the fine selfraising flour and always stir in the same direction, then cream the milk and sugar and whisk well the white of eggs [. . .] when they settled down in a nice snug and cosy little homely house, every morning they would both have brekky, simple but perfectly served. (*U.* 13, 222–28, 238–40)

Now, concerning women's sexual agency, it has traditionally been viewed through the lens of individual mastery and self-sufficiency, suggesting that women possess the capability to initiate sex, make sexual choices, and communicate desires. However, this form of agency is not universally attainable. Women have been systematically punished for exercising their sexual agency, both socially and psychologically. On one hand, they are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and Western beauty ideals, which often results in suppressing their bodily needs and feelings. On the other hand, they must navigate the delicate balance of not appearing too sexual or desiring (Chmielewski et al. 2020). In the case of disabled women, this punishment is even much more severe, given that the social imaginary is that disabled people are asexual per se. Gerty's case clearly contradicts this social imaginary because she not only exhibits sexual behavior and pleasure in a public space but also as a woman with a disability who consciously chooses "to display [and] accessorize, the very source of her stigma" (Nemecek 2010, p. 180), i.e., her legs.

Recent research has shown that women's sexual agency largely depends on the configurations and establishment of their sexual subjectivity, defined as how women perceive themselves as sexual beings. This subjectivity encompasses various dimensions, including "(a) one's awareness of her embodied feelings of desire, pleasure, and/or sexual responses, (b) one's sense of entitlement to those feelings, and (c) one's agency or ability to recognize and utilize bodily, relational, and cognitive information in acting in the interest of her own sexual needs" (Chmielewski et al. 2020, p. 307). Women who do not manifest or have not developed these dimensions of their sexual subjectivity are less likely to exercise their sexual agency. Gerty, in contrast, demonstrates awareness of her desires and pleasures. She takes the initiative in the encounter by making suggestive gestures with her lips and legs:

> Gerty smiled assent and bit her lip. A delicate pink crept into her pretty cheek but she was *determined* to let them see so she just lifted her skirt a little but just enough [. . .] Pure jealously of course it was nothing else to draw attention on

> account of the gentleman opposite looking. She felt the warm flush, a danger signal *always* with Gerty MacDowell, surging and flaming into her cheeks. [. . .] now under the brim of her new hat she ventured a look at him and the face that met her gaze there in the twilight, wan and strangely drawn, seemed to her the saddest she had ever seen. (*U.* 13, 360–70)

She feels confident in her body and appearance, allowing her not only to experience pleasure but also to sustain the encounter and provide pleasure to Bloom. She feels entitled to experience what she is experiencing, and clearly, she is using all the information she can gather from Bloom to exploit him:

> [S]he revealed all her graceful beautifully shaped legs like that, sypply soft and delicately rounded. (*U.* 13, 698–99)

> She could almost see the swift answering flash of admiration in his eyes that set her tingling in every nerve. [. . .] Her woman's instinct told her that she had raised the devil in him and at that thought a burning scarlet swept from throat to brow till the lovely colour of her face became a glorious rose. (*U.* 13, 513–20)

Gerty finds herself unable to escape societal norms and demands; however, she has learned to navigate the "fluid, variable, and often unstable relationship between her sexual oppression and her liberation" (LeMoncheck 1997, p. 12). As Nemecek points out, Gerty "negotiates being the object of male desire while remaining an intellectually curious, insightful, desiring subject" (Nemecek 2010, p. 187). Gerty's sexual agency might be described as 'thin' in the sense that it is an ambivalent agency employed in a context of limited options and might be considered unhealthy and disempowered (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2021). Nevertheless, we should not underestimate her agency; her actions still demonstrate agentic power "in the sense of navigating one's options and enacting self and identity" (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2021, p. 382). Therefore, it is more appropriate to understand sexual agency as a utilization of resources and skills that support one's sexual decision-making within the context of one's identity and situation (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2021). Gerty is making effective use of her skills and resources.

Rather than being a failed or conflicted woman with a disability whose agency is denied, a nuanced examination shows that Gerty capably exercises agency given her constrained situation. Gerty enacts an identity agency that accepts certain dominant discourses to potentially expand future freedoms and life pathways. She also refuses victimhood or the internalization of her disability as inadequacy, instead proudly displaying her body on her own terms. Her interest in feminine self-care fosters her confidence to counter the prejudices of her society toward her disability. Moreover, Gerty's sexual desires and pleasure contest assumptions of asexuality. Though oppressed, she navigates a complex historical and societal position.

5. Conclusions

As I have shown in this paper, some interpretations of Gerty fail to reconcile her dual identities as a woman and a disabled person. A patriarchal male gaze reduces Gerty to a passive object conforming to aesthetic norms, who uses beautification to mask her disability. Meanwhile, other interpretations see disability as diminishing her identity as a woman, critiquing Gerty as both a failed woman for not resisting oppression and a failed disabled person for not accepting herself. I argue that integrating a feminist disability perspective into the interpretation of Gerty opens a symbolic horizon in which her femininity and disability intensify certain cultural norms yet also transform them in empowering ways. Revising notions of agency beyond the common view—as an action of individual mastery and sufficiency—further upholds Gerty's agency. Her efforts at self-care foster confidence and contest the assumption of disabled women's asexuality. Gerty uses her available resources and social discourses to carve out options suited to her precarious situation. Though she operates under material and ideological constraints, Gerty constructs a coherent identity and sexuality through embodied decisions. Her non-normative, 'cripped' eroticism

challenges normative ways of understanding the embodied subject, not only of a woman but also of other gendered embodiments. Re-examining Gerty's intersectional experience thus enriches conceptual models beyond reductive categorizations that have dominated critical interpretation.

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Notes

1 Peter Lee argues that Gerty's age in *Ulysses* is ambiguous and has significant narrative implications. While some scholars contend she is in her early twenties, Lee suggests that she is more likely a teenager, which aligns her more closely with a younger version of Molly Bloom and enhances the thematic parallels between the characters. He concludes that Gerty's age should be seen as central to understanding the novel's depiction of female characters and their roles in the narrative. (Lee 2013).

2 Gerty comes from a violent household with an alcoholic father, which had prevented him from achieving a more prosperous future for his family: "But the vile decoction which has ruined so many hearths and homes had cast its shadow over her childhood days. Nay, she had even witnessed in the home circle deeds of violence caused by intemperance and had seen own father, a prey to the fumes of intoxication, forget himself completely for if there was one thing of all things that Gerty knew it was that the man who lifts his hand to a woman save in the way of kindness, deserves to be branded as the lowest of the low". (*U.* 13, 296–302).

3 Jauchen's argument that Gerty is portrayed as a potential prostitute influenced by cultural perceptions and socioeconomic factors is not entirely convincing because it relies heavily on speculative interpretations and stereotypes that are not clearly supported by the text. His reading assumes that Gerty's background and physical impairment predispose her to prostitution, yet it lacks concrete evidence from the narrative to substantiate this claim. By overemphasizing cultural forces, the argument reduces Gerty to a stereotype, neglecting the complexities and contradictions of her character. Additionally, this perspective may overlook Joyce's broader thematic intentions in *Ulysses* (Joyce 1986), such as exploring the nuances of female identity and desire, making Jauchen's analysis seem limited and reductive. (Jauchen 2008).

4 Henke makes the case that Joyce is parodying the novel *The Lamplighter*, not only by adopting part of the narrative style but also by presenting Gerty as an incarnation and parody of Gertrude Flint, the main character of Maria Cummins's novel. (Henke 1982, p. 133).

5 Fritz Senn characterizes Gerty as lame and incomplete and states that the awkwardness of the prose suggests the awkwardness of her limp. Richard Ellman says that Gerty limps as an example of how the body fails the imagination and hope. Seen and Ellman are quoted by (Bednarska 2011).

6 See (Cormier 2008) and (Colangelo 2022) for analyses of the blind stripling and his portrayal of disability.

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