

**Ambiguous Bodies:
The Self/Body Paradigm as Challenged in *Geek Love*'s Conjoined Twins
and Flannery O'Connor's Intersexed 'Freak' in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"**

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Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss how this use of disability by both Dunn and O'Connor helps them to expose perceptions of "normal" corporeality. I will compare Dunn's conjoined twins to O'Connor's sexually ambiguous character in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," for just as the twins are "peculiarly connected and unexpectedly separate" (Dunn, p. 51), the intersexed "freak" (a derogatory term I will explore) challenges existing body schemas in terms of finite gender categories. Both the twins and the "freak" embody corporeal states that illuminate the limits of the modern (and particularly the "individualized" American) mind in grappling with issues of independence, identity, agency, and what it means to be a "whole" person.

Keywords/terms

Normal, Freak, Gender, Identity, Intersex, Self/Body

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"And this also means that we never know, and never have known, how to cut up a subject."

–Jacques Derrida "Eating Well," or 'The Calculation of the Subject.'"

Both Katherine Dunn and Flannery O'Connor have employed disability as a narrative device to negotiate the social implications of having a so-called abnormal body; this technique is, of course, ubiquitous in literature. David Mitchell and Sharon Synder have termed it "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell, p. 222); it is the reliance on disability found in virtually all of O'Connor's stories of the Southern grotesque. Author Katherine Dunn has taken this kind of narrative to an extreme, causing her novel *Geek Love* to be both criticized and praised for its contribution to Disability Studies. *Geek Love* not only rests on disability for its narrative to function, as O'Connor's stories do, but actually does so to the point of blatant extremity, thereby turning concepts such as "normalcy" and "disability" on their heads.

This "perpetual discursive dependency on disability" (Mitchell, p. 222) employed by both Dunn and O'Connor allows them to expose perceptions of "normal" corporeality. In this essay, *Geek Love's* conjoined twins are compared to O'Connor's sexually ambiguous character in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"; just as the twins are "peculiarly connected and unexpectedly separate" (Dunn, p. 51), the intersexed "freak"¹ challenges existing body schemas in terms of finite gender categories. Both the twins and the "freak" embody corporeal states that illuminate the limits of the modern (and particularly the "individualized" American) mind in grappling with issues of independence, identity, agency, and what it means to be a "whole" person.

Conjoined Twins: Confronting the Paradigm

An understanding of how these characters intersect thematically begins with an understanding of their representational power inside and outside of their respective texts. Katherine Dunn inflates narrative prosthesis by using the "anonymous background of the norm" (Mitchell, p. 224) to expose the critique she makes through the unique bodies of the Binewski children. Among Dunn's colorful and quirky cast of "chemically altered freaks" (Mitchell, p. 224), the conjoined twins Electra and Iphigenia can serve as a unique complication of the commonly accepted one body/one self paradigm. Electra and Iphigenia, or "Elly and Iphy" exist as characters within a history of conjoined twins' confronting the body/self paradigm, stemming from the original "Siamese twins" from which the now improper term for conjoined twins gets its origins (Grosz, p. 61-2).

Conjoined twin-hood has been situated medically and culturally among other so-called “birth defects” in historical representations. In the 1932 film *Freaks*, which has only minimal plot and is little else than a filmed freak show, the conjoined Hilton twins are featured briefly alongside representations of other marginalized groups—individuals with dwarfism, microcephaly, and other genetically and otherwise acquired bodily “irregularities.” Likewise in the semi-autobiographical film about the Hilton sisters produced in 1952 entitled *Chained for Life*, the Hilton are closely associated with the spectacular—their singing duet is preceded by a plate-juggling tap-dancer and hyper-speed accordion player. Neither *Freaks* nor *Chained for Life* have strong (or even, at times, detectable) plotlines, and neither film does much more than exhibit the twins themselves as the central conflict of the tale—the very existence of conjoined twins is apparently conflict enough. Similarly, in Dunn’s text, the twins’ brother Arty comments on the phenomenon of conjoined twin fascination: the twins “could sit on a bench and wave and they’d still get crowds” (p. 103). Even when little else is happening in the story surrounding them, the bodies of conjoined twins elicit commentary enough on the weakness and limitations of the singular body/self ideology.

These portrayals of conjoined twins are not only a thing of the past. In 2012, TLC aired a reality show called *Abby and Brittany*, in which very little actually happens aside from the conjoined twins performing mundane tasks and going out for pizza with their friends. The twins themselves, sharing a torso and each having control of their respective half of their limbs, contain all the allurements the production needs within their body alone. Seemingly in keeping with contemporary ideas of political correctness, the members of the show’s cast never mention the “conjoined twinness” of Abby and Brittany on camera. While the show could be seen as a straightforward attempt to normalize the twins by having them carry out everyday tasks, the effect is that the viewer is left with little else to consider other than their corporeal state; the lack of acknowledgement by those around Abby and Brittany seems to draw even further attention to their bodily difference. The show does little more than imitate *Freaks* and *Chained for Life* in the form of a modern-day, albeit “toned-down,” exploitation of bodily difference.

Although Dunn’s Elly and Iphy are completely *fictional* representations of conjoined twins, they help raise similar issues as these other depictions, although possibly with more freedom to do so—Dunn is so often racy and tongue-in-cheek that much of her meaning seems protected by the cloak of satire and the fact that her characters are not actual people. Elly and Iphy nonetheless serve to deconstruct current notions of the nature of identity (that one self equals one body, and vice versa), which Mitchell and Snyder would call the twins’ “representational power” (p. 222). As Allison Pingree writes in her article about the Hilton sisters, conjoined twins “arrest the attention and imagination of the American public because they embody both a national

fantasy and a national nightmare” (p. 174); the “fantasy,” Pingree goes on to say, is of the sameness and interchangeability of all selves (in the democratic sense), and the “nightmare” is that individualism is thrown into question. Conjoined twins raise the issue of Western society’s need to interpret and other bodies that challenge its fundamental societal framework.

“Peculiarly Connected and Unexpectedly Separate”

Elly and Iphy are described as “Siamese twins with perfect upper bodies joined at the waist and sharing one set of hips and legs. They usually sat and walked and slept with their long arms around each other...They were always beautiful, slim, and huge-eyed” (Dunn, p. 8). By Dunn’s portrayal of their interactions it is clear that the twins have a connection unlike any of the other siblings—if “you pulled Elly’s hair, Iphy yelped too. If you kissed Iphy’s cheek, Elly smiled. If Elly burnt her hand on the popcorn machine, Iphy cried also and couldn’t sleep that night from the pain...” (p. 51). This seemingly “magical” physical connection is in line with other depictions of conjoined twins as well—in *Freaks*, Daisy appears to react with romantic arousal when Violet’s fiancé kisses her; Abby and Brittany, are shown creating artwork together with very few words exchanged, as if what Oly calls the twins’ “separate hearts but meshing bloodstream” (Dunn, p. 51) makes their communication undetectably subtle. Elly and Iphy’s brother Arty went as far as to jest that Elly and Iphy’s “two brains functioned as right and left lobes of a single brain” (p. 51).

Elizabeth Grosz, in her article concerning the simultaneous horror and fascination elicited by “freaks,” comments that this intimate sort of connection destabilizes “the usual hard and fast distinction between the boundaries of one subject and another...” (p. 62). Through their subtle blurred unison, the twins bleed into one another as subjects. Yet Dunn works hard to maintain a fast distinction between Elly and Iphy. Elly is often outspoken and rude to her siblings, while Iphy is more placating—they differ in opinion, often bicker, and have clashing relationships with others as well. Iphy, for example, loves Arty, while “Elly...didn’t love him at all” (p. 78). This divide occurs not only between the twins and others but between one twin and the other twin—“Elly [punishes] Iphy by eating food that [disagrees] with them...” (p. 52), and in several scenes they become heap of swinging punches on the floor. The Hilton sisters also face conflict when one wishes to marry and the other does not, and Abby and Brittany are shown to have differing feelings toward their friend’s cat—as Abby touches the cat, Brittany admonishes her to “Leave the cat alone!” (Abby and Brittany).

Differences like these mean that the “peculiar connection” conjoined twins share is not always clear or definable within the terms available. Although Elly and Iphy are often referred to as “the twins” (thereby treating them as a unified entity), their mother Crystal Lil demands that the Binewski children “use the plural form...whenever [they] refer to Electra and Iphigenia. We do not say,

‘Where *is* Elly and Iphy?’” she clarifies, “We say ‘Where *are* Elly and Iphy?’” (p. 50). Interestingly, the twins’ connectedness, or rather the elements which connect them, are at times the points over which their strongest separateness manifests itself. In spite of experiencing digestion in connection with one another, Elly and Iphy do have autonomous control of their limbs and their “own” regions of the body (in one instance Iphy vomits “her private sector of their guts” [p. 254]). But they definitely do disagree, the most significant instance for Elly and Iphy being their first sexual experience, a subject that they initially battle over once they begin to come to terms with the role it plays in their lives as “freaks.” After Elly takes the initiative to sell their virginity, Iphy laments, “[Elly] just sold our cherry!...I was *saving* mine!” (p. 203, Dunn’s emphasis), an appeal to her *individual* virginity being also Elly’s, therefore making it somehow collective between them. The idea of a collective or shared virginity and sexuality is as confounding as conceiving of Elly and Iphy’s later pregnancy and motherhood—who is given the role of mother, especially in terms of the tragic ending of the twins’ motherhood, if one twin wants the child and the other does not? Through the characterization of the twins, readers are forced to consider issues of abortion, sexuality, consensual sex, and the possibility of communal and plural selfhood.

“A Man and a Woman Both”

The issues raised by Elly and Iphy are not unlike those raised by O’Connor’s intersexed character. Both intersexuals and conjoined twins “violate sacred ideologies of western culture” (Garland-Thomson, p. 341) in terms of definability within existing paradigms of one body/one self and the male/female social constructs. O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” highlights this through the yet-curious and naïve eyes of a young child; upon listening to the description of the intersexed “freak” the narrator’s cousins see at the fair, the child cannot understand what she is hearing: “The child felt every muscle strained as if she were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself. ‘You mean it had two heads?’ [the child] said. ‘No,’ Susan said, ‘it was a man and a woman both...’” (p. 206). The child’s view of the “riddle” shows that she has adopted the widely accepted notion that one body is equal to one self, and therefore has no schema with which to understand how a self could exhibit both male and female. This line of inquiry could lead the child as far as to question the nature of self at all—what could the “self” indicate, if it is not the thing thing singularly housed in the body?

This conundrum presented by the intersexed character in O’Connor’s story has its own notable history. The nineteenth century was America’s heyday of public display of bodily difference, during which time what Grosz calls “ambiguous being[s]” (p. 60) were the most common sideshow. These exhibitions displayed “graphic, nongenital, lateral hermaphroditism” (Grosz, p. 61); that is, half of the exhibitor would be dressed as a man and the other half as a woman. It seems that “halving” the subject in this way was somehow preferable to placing the

subject on what Grosz terms the “sexual continuum” (p. 60). Grosz points out that the “subject who has clear-cut male and female parts seems more acceptable than the subject whose genitalia is neither male nor female,” as these subjects “imperil the very constitution of subjectivity according to sexual categories” (Grosz, p. 61). The clinging to the male/female binary in concrete terms caused this routine “halving” of intersexed persons.

Society’s tendency of “halving” may be seen as the cause for O’Connor’s narrator to understand the intersexed “freak” as having two heads. The intersexed person’s space within society in terms of the male/female binary is also not clear, which O’Connor’s “freak” exhibits in her/his² performance in the tent at the fair. The “tent...had been divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women,” and the “freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women...” (p. 206). The “freak” is said to have a “voice, slow and nasal and neither high nor low” (p. 206). The exhibition of the “freak” clearly depicts the oscillation between society’s perceived “fixed” sexual categories in terms of bodily attributes. The intersexual “freak” is forced to inhabit both definitions and paradoxically cannot be fully either one.

O’Connor’s intersexed “freak’s” “abnormality of embodiment” (Garland-Thomson, p. 341) is cast against all that is considered “sacred,” as the child ponders the “freak” saying that God created her/him that way. The child’s seemingly naïve suppositions about the “freak” are depicted amidst her partaking in the Eucharist after a prayer for help with her bad behavior toward others. The resulting juxtaposition serves to underscore the arbitrary nature of society’s stigmas about non-normative bodies and demonstrates how the “freak” complicates her belief that the body is a temple of the Holy Ghost. This moment also serves as a powerful comment on mainstream society’s ability to marginalize those with bodies that fail to conform to the corporeal ideal; the child’s struggle with her idea that the body is a temple of the Holy Ghost effectively exposes the arbitrary and culturally influenced nature of corporeal stigma. The child herself asks: isn’t the intersexed individual, just as the child is, a “temple of the Holy Ghost”? The reader can ask along with her: if “God” is believed to be the designer of the body, is not the “freak” also a display of God’s creative abilities?

Singular and Plural

According to Garland-Thomson, these bodies are so “threatening to the order of things...that they are almost always surgically normalized through amputation and mutilation immediately after birth” (p. 341), a fact to be discussed further later on. This can be seen in terms of “order” in the general sense of societal control and in terms of Arty’s crafted order (power) in *Geek Love*. Arty’s contention that the twins are “true freaks” who “don’t care if [he] draws a bigger crowd than they do” because “nobody’s going to upstage them” (p. 103) comes

to fruition when he realizes that to dominate the twins he must separate them. At first mention, the reader might think that what Arty means by “separation” is to “norm” the twins in a fashion akin to Arty’s endeavors to “liberate” his cult followers (through amputation). This moment in the narrative can be seen to illuminate Arty’s need, and by extension, mainstream society’s need to normalize conjoined twins due to their threat to societal order. By doing so, mainstream society is “expung[ing] the kinds of corporeal human variations that contradict the ideologies the dominant order depends upon...” (Garland-Thomson, p. 341) to maintain its perceived order. However, it is revealed that Arty’s idea of separation has to do with inhibiting the twins’ ability to perform as a unit and to sever their intimate connection, thus removing them as a threat to his own capitalistic superiority. Elly’s resulting lobotomy leaves her unable to care for herself without Iphy’s aid, unearthing another tenuous component of what can be meant by “personhood.”

This circumstance illuminates how the one-to-one body/self ratio fails to contend with such intimate bodily connectedness and ambiguity exemplified by vegetative states of consciousness. Elly’s lobotomy causes her to transform into what the medical community has termed a “parasitic twin.” Dr. Phyllis’ surgical techniques having “reduced that bright creature to a permanent state resembling the liquid droop of a decayed zucchini...” (p. 272), it now becomes Iphy’s responsibility to perform basic grooming and other tasks for Elly, such as braiding her hair “so she wouldn’t drool on it...” (p. 276). The ambiguity arises as the reader must determine whether Iphy is taking care of her own body, which she now resides in (in terms of agency) as the sole actor, or caring for a separate self in the form of her sister’s unresponsive, but living, torso. This problem manifests in the novel’s narration as “Elly and Iphy,” begin being referred to separately—“Iphy,” cast as the “autositic twin,” and “Elly” as a name for the unresponsive torso, referred to mostly within the context of Iphy wiping the drool from her mouth or momentarily propping her up. It seems no longer clear that there are two identities represented by the twins, nor does it seem safe to say that they are still acting as one entity.

The twins’ singularity and plurality becomes increasingly convoluted through their narrative arch, as in the latter half of Dunn’s novel, Iphy “struggles to balance the flabby monster that sprouts from her waist” (Dunn, p. 273). Grosz’s ensuing inquiry becomes relevant: “...Does the body image include the parasitic body...if the body is to include sensations and experiences the subject cannot experience in the first person?” (Grosz, p. 63). That is, with Elly lobotomized, is it still possible to conceive of them as individuals, if Elly would not be able to function without Iphy’s help? Does Elly’s vegetative state qualify her as a “whole person,” even when those around her believe that “Elly isn’t there anymore” (Dunn, p. 277)? Or harkening back to Crystal Lil’s terms, have the twins shifted from “Where *are* Elly and Iphy?” to “Where *is* Iphy?” and “Where *is* Elly?”

With the boundaries of bodies so called into question, the twins further complicate Pingree's notion of the American fantasy/nightmare. Post-lobotomy, the twins represent the nightmare gone even more awry—to conceive of being attached to a lobotomized, unresponsive twin is as nightmarish as considering *being* the lobotomized twin herself. In Dunn's tale, the "separation" is a death knell for the twins—without their intimate connection, they soon turn on each other/themselves. In short, the twins never recover from their separation—Elly only regains her lucidity enough to fatally stab their baby, causing Iphy to kill her in a tragic portrait of their body's schism.

In a similar way, intersexed infants are so disruptive to the operating schema that they have been, according to Lennard Davis's article on policy concerning such "disability," often surgically operated upon at birth to assign them to one of the two supposed sexual identities (Davis, p. 267). *Geek Love* mentions a "pre-transexual" who would soon become a "real girl" (Dunn, p. 16-17), indicating that the state of intersexuality is only the state preceding assignment to one category or the other (male or female). These surgical procedures, when medically possible, are routinely performed on babies and newborns, and considered more "damaging" to adults who have formed their sense of sexual identity. Similarly, the routine separation of conjoined twins performed after birth can disrupt the pair if undertaken too late, or in the words of the doctor consulted in *Chained for Life*, after the twins have "been conditioned since birth to live as an entity." The routine nature of these surgeries is justified by the belief that surgical intervention is more successful the earlier it occurs, as Grosz points out, "the younger the children are, the less formed their body-image is" (p. 64). For conjoined twins and intersexual persons alike, the implications of such alterations, if actually carried out, are potentially damaging no matter what the age, as they are mutilating, and homicidal, if not suicidal.

These surgeries are often done when an intersexed child is far too young to have a choice in the matter, and separating conjoined twins often (although not always) leaves both twins worse off—Abby and Brittany, to return to a real-life example, would no longer be able to walk. What is more, it is very common to perform surgery at the expense of the life of one of the twins. Regardless of the survivability of the remaining twin, the psychological effects of the knowledge of such a surgery are potentially very traumatic—as traumatic as operating on an intersexual baby, thereby forcing them to conform to a sexual identity that may seem alien to them as they mature.

Fetishization of Bodily Difference

Although certainly not born into situations like the Binewski twins were, many real-life "freaks" may as well have been—the Hilton sisters entered show business virtually as soon as they could walk, and were carted all around the world their entire lives as a money-making duo. Intersexual persons were likewise regularly

adopted into traveling exhibitions, and, just as Elly and Iphy could have “[sat] on a bench and wave[d]” (Dunn, p. 103), had little trouble making money from their bodily abnormality (or difference). *Exclusively* due to their abnormality, in fact: the real-life conjoined Hilton twins drew their crowds because of their bodily difference, and probably not because they learned to play the saxophone and violin. And what of the audiences and their participation in “freakery?” Novelty strip clubs featuring intersexuals (much like the one depicted at the beginning of *Geek Love*) represent the way society’s attitude toward difference can siphon people into exhibition for sustenance. The sexualization of “freaks” is wedded to the practice of their exhibition—the sight of the Hilton’s stage presence led to many questions by their spectators, such as how Violet and Daisy “performed such normal activities as walking and sitting....Did they feel the same emotion? When one was touched, did the other sense it? How similar were they in personality and taste? How intertwined were their bodies? Could they be separated?” (Pingree, p. 173).

One could also speculate that viewers were more interested in knowing, as Elly puts it, “How do we fuck? That and who, or maybe what. Most of the guys wonder what it would be like to fuck us” (Dunn, p. 207). Elly is convinced, in fact, that their audiences are actually concerned with very little other than their ability to have sex: “They don’t care that I play bass and Iphy plays treble, or whether we both like the same flavor ice cream or any of the other stupid questions they ask...” she explains to Oly after the twins begin sexually selling themselves, “... the thing that boggles them and keeps them staring all the way through a sonata in G is musing about our posture in bed” (Dunn, p. 207).

The fetishization of conjoined twins and intersexual persons represents what Pingree lists among the various emotional responses they evoke—“from wonder to confusion, curiosity to pity, amusement to awe, and most of all, an intense desire to *contain and interpret*” (Pingree p. 173, emphasis added). The challenge of the paradigm is present in Elly and Iphy’s first sexual encounter, when the reader must grapple with whether it is considered rape if one twin is willing and the other is not—blurred though the issue is, apparently even for Elly and Iphy, the twins’ capitalistic surroundings cause them to decide to go into business independent of Arty. “Norms,” Elly says, are preoccupied with how they have sex, and the twins decide to “capitalize on that curiosity,” their plan being to charge each client a minimum of a thousand dollars. Commenting on her initial reservations, Iphy later muses, “Maybe I was dumb about this. A virginity like ours could be worth a lot. Maybe we should have taken bids...up in lights, ‘The Exquisite Convenience of Two Women with One Cunt!’” (p. 205). The twins themselves are aware of their sexuality as something marketable, and their visits from “from connoisseurs of sexual novelty” (p. 239) become their chief business project, as they all but abandon the less-profitable vaudeville stage. The issue of the twins’ sex life becomes multifaceted, with such questions arising as whether the twins are always engaging in multiple-partnered sex acts if they have no

choice but to do so, which is especially perplexing in the face of the accepted body/self paradigm due to today's society viewing sexuality in terms of the individual.

“Confounding Mathematics of Personhood”

Iphy herself comments that “if there’s one thing a healthy, beautiful, utterly normal boy does not do, it’s fall in love with half a pair of Siamese twins...” (Dunn, p. 281). *Chained for Life* also depicts one twin’s desire to marry bringing about her need to separate from her sister—her sister who is a *part of her body*. Although *Chained for Life* does ultimately depict the granting of one twin the right to marry without separation, her new husband abandons her the next day, saying the confusion of being married to a “Siamese twin” was just too much for him.

For intersexed and conjoined twins, their “peculiarity” is known to them only by society’s reaction of puzzlement and horror (Grosz, p. 63). Dunn even directly alludes to this phenomenon by including that “Iphy felt sorry for everybody who wasn’t a twin” (p. 52). Regardless of the feelings of actual conjoined twins (no doubt there *are* twins who have toyed with the idea of separation), the impetus for their “otherness” lies more with society’s causing them to feel unable to satisfactorily fit within its schema. The need of intersexual persons to fit into one sexual identity category or another seems also filtered through society’s need to define them, and less to do with how the intersexual person might perceive her/his body if they lived in a society that viewed sex and gender as a socially constructed identity.

Just as Arty’s separation of Elly and Iphy ultimately leads to the twins’ “intricate separateness and unity” (Dunn, p. 239) being traded for their tragic end, O’Connor’s tale seems to comment on society’s unwillingness to shift or expand ideas of personhood and collectivity by having the police shut down the fair at the story’s close. As far as the law’s decision about the twins’ culpability for the run-away fiancé’s murder in *Chained for Life*, the film offers no conclusion; how could it? When society itself has no way to absorb conjoined twins or intersexuals into its fabric without commodification of their bodies as “freaks,” whether in the form of freak shows, novelty prostitution, or reality television shows, the “confounding mathematics of personhood” (Pingree, p. 173) results only in their marginalization and spectacle.

Notes

¹ The term “freak” is one which O’Conner uses for the intersexed character because it is the term the surrounding culture would have used. Dunn’s novel effectively reverses the common definition of “freak,” in line with her larger agenda to flip the

ideas of normal/abnormal. The word “freak” will be used in this essay to refer to those whose livelihood is derived from being publically exhibited, and in quotation marks to indicate that it is noted that the term is, without a doubt, one which stems from the dark history of exploitation of disability and difference. That exploitation is certainly explored and complicated in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and Geek Love, with the institution of “freakery” in capitalistic terms is a central theme in both works, as well as in Disability Studies today.

² *The lack of appropriate pronouns in language is itself another example of the way the male/female binary is reinforced. The she/he, her/him form has been used here to highlight both the patriarchal presence noted by reversing their typical order and to highlight the paucity of terminology available to address and refer to individuals situated in non-normative locations on the spectrum of gender/sexual identity.*

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