



# Vulnerability and Disability in Contemporary Nordic Literature: Linn Ullmann's *Grace* and Sofi Oksanen's *Baby Jane*

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the relation between vulnerability and disability, when viewing these states as concepts and as conditions for human life? Many thinkers describe vulnerability as an inescapable situation for all that is living. ‘As embodied species, we share a common vulnerability emerging from the condition of living in bodies and in time’, Marianne Hirsch summarizes (2016, p. 80). All humans are vulnerable as infants, small children and in old age because we have not yet acquired—or lost—various abilities. Anyone is vulnerable to threats against health and able-bodiedness, at any time. That is to say, anyone can become disabled in the course of life as a result of injury or illness. However, to say that disability is a part of the human condition may not be as easily accepted as the idea of a shared

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vulnerability. Disabled people are often regarded as a special group with special needs. If the norm is the autonomous, independent individual, people who have difficulty fulfilling—or who are not deemed to fulfil—this ideal are considered to be deviations from the norm.

Another complication is that disability theory and activism have a tradition of focusing on independence and autonomy as rights for the disabled. Vulnerability—in the sense of our mutual dependency on each other—may therefore not be readily accepted as a politically viable concept by disability activists and scholars (Knight 2014, p. 22). However, even if vulnerability is conceived of as a common condition for all humans, it is important to acknowledge that vulnerability is not the same for all. As Hirsch puts it, ‘But, importantly, vulnerability is also socially, politically, and economically created and differentially imposed’ (2016, p. 80).

Here, she touches on the unequal distribution of vulnerability, which causes some groups of people to be more exposed to threats to their lives, health and subjectivity than others. As Don Kulick and Jens Rydström point out, we ‘are not all equally captured in prognosis or equally impacted by regimes of debility’ (2015, p. 272). Similarly, Jasbir Puar (2017) points out that the idea that we will all be disabled if we live long enough is not true in a global context. The distribution of risk—or, more concretely, ‘where we live, what resources we have, what traumas we have endured, what color our skin is, what access we have to clean water, air, and decent food, what type of health care we have, what kind of work we do’ (p. xiv)—involves factors that may prevent people from even reaching old age. The unequal distribution of vulnerability evidently has social and economic consequences. Judith Butler describes precarity as ‘indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs’ (2015, p. 119). In the present work, I understand precarity as the heightened economic and social insecurity experienced by different groups in capitalist society.

In contemporary fiction, disability is both conspicuous and made invisible. There are fictional stories that are explicitly ‘about’ disability, or that have characters with various diagnoses, such as the autism-spectrum detective Saga Norén in the TV series *Bron/Broen*. Disability is often used as a device to promote a certain kind of suspense or drama. Saga Norén’s autism spectrum condition allows for a Sherlock-like attention to detail and superior logic, as well as for a drama about social isolation that aligns with the series’ gloomy, cold and violent Scandinavian cityscape. However, as Michael Bérubé (2016) has pointed out, disability does not always

present itself as such: ‘disability and ideas about disability can be and have been put to use in fictional narratives in ways that go far beyond any specific rendering of any disabled character or characters’ (p. 2). He takes his cue from Lennard J. Davis who, as early as 1995, showed in *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) that the concept of disability is fundamental to a critical understanding of almost any literary work.

Davis and Bérubé support this point with examples that are mainly taken from English-language fiction; however, in contemporary Scandinavian fiction, Sofi Oksanen’s *Norma* (2015) may be mentioned. This novel is about a girl (Norma) whose hair grows a metre a day; Norma’s hair has other unusual qualities, such as the ability to sense the intentions and moods of those around her, and the ability to affect her own mood. The novel combines magical realism with a harsh critique of the exploitation of women’s bodies, by making Norma’s hair a product on a market. In fact, Norma’s extraordinary abilities can also be regarded as disabilities: they must be hidden, which means that she is more or less imprisoned in her apartment. Her hair is a stigma, and a part of her body to which she must adapt, whether she wants to or not. As Bérubé has argued, ‘disability in the relation between text and reader *need not involve any character with disabilities at all*. It can involve *ideas about* disability, and ideas about the stigma associated with disability’ (2016, p. 19). Disability may, then, be a relevant perspective for texts that mainly appear to represent other challenges to physical, mental or cognitive abilities, such as illness or ageing.

In a Nordic context, few attempts have been made to analyse the representation of disability in literary fiction. Indeed, judging from the critical reception of Nordic literature and the general lack of research on Nordic fiction and disability, it seems as though disability is primarily considered as an aspect of texts only if it is clearly announced as a central theme, or is an important part of the portrayal of a character. One well-known example is the hacker heroine Lisbeth Salander of Stieg Larsson’s *The Millennium Trilogy*, whose diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome has been analysed as a literary trope (Ma 2014) and in a neurodiversity context (Freeman Loftis 2015, pp. 130–150). However, even in this case, in which disability is clearly foregrounded, research has mainly focused on other aspects. For example, in an anthology of Swedish gender studies on *The Millennium Trilogy*, only one of the eight articles makes any mention of her autism-spectrum condition. When it is brought up, it is described as

a problematic literary device, which makes Salander a stereotypical ‘geek girl’ (Fahlgren 2013, p. 93).

In this article, the concept of vulnerability will be used to shed light on how disability is narrated in two contemporary literary texts from the Nordic countries in which disability is not explicit: Sofi Oksanen’s *Baby Jane* (2005), a feminist love story about a lesbian couple whose relationship breaks up when one of the women gradually loses her independence due to depression and severe anxiety; and Linn Ullmann’s *Nåde* (2002 [*Grace* 2005]) about ageing, illness and the gradual loss of different abilities that threaten the sense of self of a middle-aged man. Neither Oksanen’s nor Ullmann’s novels have been read as texts employing disability as a way to discuss existential or social conditions, but both narrate different kinds of vulnerability. Ullmann’s text is about illness, death and remembering the life that has passed. Oksanen’s novel has mainly attracted attention for its critique of the patriarchal capitalist society, which makes women’s bodies products on a market.

This article can only begin to answer the more overarching question about the role and function of disability in contemporary Nordic fiction. Its primary aim is to use the concept of vulnerability to explore aspects of able-bodiedness and disability in these two texts. A focus on vulnerability may help to disrupt the boundaries of ‘the disabled’—both as a group and as a specific theme in literature—and, instead, foreground the idea that humans are only temporarily able-bodied (Knight 2014, p. 25) and that disability is a consequence of normalcy. An acknowledgement of shared vulnerability may thus be used to challenge ableism and place disability on a human continuum of abilities and disabilities.

## DISABILITY, VULNERABILITY AND LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW

Since the emergence of what Tom Shakespeare has called ‘Cultural Disability Studies’ (2013, p. 47) in the 1990s, disability discourse and representation have become the centre of attention after a strong focus on material and social relations in the disability studies of the 1980s and 1990s. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s seminal *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) was an important part of this development. The underlying assumption in Garland-Thomson’s work is that there is a continuity of language

and material conditions: cultural representations of disability have consequences for the identity of real people. Through the concept of ‘normate’, Garland-Thomson also zoomed in on the social construction of normality. ‘The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definite human beings’ (2017/1997, p. 8). Instead of just scrutinizing representations of disabled characters, this concept switches the focus to the norms that are producing the separation of ‘non-disabled’ and ‘disabled’—that is, to ableist norms, which are often activated in the attitudes of the non-disabled towards others. In her typology of disability representations, drawing from photographs and advertisements picturing disabled people, Garland-Thomson identified four types of visual rhetoric: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic and the realistic (2002). In many cases, I argue, these four types can also be applied to literature.

Another influential contribution in this field is David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000). The concept of ‘narrative prosthesis’ refers to the use of disability in fiction in a way that supports and stabilizes normality and the social and moral order. In this case, disability is not represented in its own right but is, rather, used as a function to relieve the discomfort of the divergent or abnormal. Disability as narrative prosthesis is typically manifested through stereotypical notions of pity, or by the recovery from or overcoming of disability, thereby restoring a state of normalcy.

In *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representations* (2007), Ato Quayson relies on the earlier contributions of Garland-Thomson and those of Mitchell and Snyder. His study has been influential in its further explorations of the relation between the normate and fictional disabled characters. This relation, according to Quayson (2007), produces an ‘aesthetic nervousness’: ‘dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability’ (p. 15), he claims, drawing from Mitchell and Snyder’s idea of disability as a ‘textual obstacle’ (2000, p. 50). Quayson proposes a typology of disability representation in nine categories, arguing that, in comparison with visual representation, literary works demand a more subtle and fine-tuned typology (2007, p. 215), because of the interconnectedness of different levels of the text. Disability is thus not just an ethical or political aspect of the text, but also an aesthetic aspect that may ‘lead to a complete reevaluation of critical emphasis’ of the canon (2007, p. 27). Like Quayson,

Michael Bérubé argues in *The Secret Lives of Stories* that disability in literary texts is not just about representation. Rather, it functions in the form of ‘narrative *deployments* of disability’ that are active in various narrative strategies: temporality, motifs and narrative self-awareness (Bérubé 2016, p. 3). The notion that disability may not always be about disabled characters, or be a manifest representation of disability is crucial for this chapter.

How, then, do vulnerability and disability intersect in literature? Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* was published well before vulnerability became more commonly theorized; nevertheless, she touches on the subject. In discussing Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, she points out that his physical difference, which carries an implication of vulnerability, is in conflict with the ideas of autonomy and self-determination that are present in the novel. ‘Ahab, along with other disabled figures, poses the troubling question of whether any person is independent of physical limitations, immune to external forces, and without need of assistance or care from others’ (2017/1997, pp. 45–46). The images of disabled women in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are ‘icons of vulnerability’ that elicit the reader’s sympathy and indignation, Garland-Thomson argues (2017/1997, p. 82). Though the disabled women only play minor roles in the narrative, the characters are important for the novel’s rhetorical impact on the reader.

Interestingly, neither Quayson nor Bérubé considers vulnerability in relation to disability in a theoretical sense in their more recent contributions. However, in his study on ethics and life writing, *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004), G. Thomas Couser uses the concept of vulnerability both to describe the vulnerability to harm of the physically or cognitively impaired subject, and to express that subject’s vulnerability to misrepresentation in other people’s narratives—such as those written by family members and physicians (2004, pp. x–xii). Evidently, there are ethical questions pertaining to biographical narratives about people with disabilities who are unable to give their consent or respond to the narratives, such as in the case of dementia or intellectual impairments, that set these narratives apart from autobiographies written by disabled people themselves. Fiction presents another case, which lacks the truth-claim of biography and autobiography, but involves similar ethical questions in relation to disability representation. Thus, ‘people with disabilities are also vulnerable to involuntary and prejudicial representation in diverse media’, Couser (2009, p. 17) points out.

In *Embodying the Monster. Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002), Margrit Shildrick reads the monster in western thought as a difference we want to project onto others, since it undermines the idea of self-sufficiency and challenges standards of normality. The monster can be seen as vulnerable as a consequence of the deviation from bodily normality but, above all, it ‘threatens to expose the vulnerability at the heart of the ideal model of body/self’ (Shildrick 2002, p. 54). Shildrick’s main goal is to deconstruct the phantasy of the autonomous subject of modernity, and to argue for an embodied ethics that is able to accept or even embrace difference, rather than effacing it. Therefore, disability plays a secondary part, as it is only one kind of monstrosity among others, such as cyborgs and mythological creatures.

In a wider context, disability and vulnerability have been discussed in conjunction—for example, in relation to citizenship. In her article ‘Disability and Vulnerability’, Jackie Leach Scully compares the consequences of two different notions of vulnerability: vulnerability as a feature of human ontology, and vulnerability as something pertaining to certain groups that risk being subject to harm more than others (2013, p. 206). The former notion risks overlooking the fact that particular circumstances may make some individuals or groups more vulnerable than others, while the latter reinforces a dichotomy between the ‘normal’ and ‘vulnerable others’, among whom disabled people are likely to be placed (Scully 2013, p. 206). Arguing that a ‘high proportion of the vulnerabilities commonly associated with disability are [...] contingent rather than inherent, because they are secondary to a particular social response to impairment’ (2013, p. 209), Scully challenges the idea that vulnerability is a kind of ‘autonomy deficit’ (2013, p. 212) from which disabled people suffer. Besides the shared vulnerability of our bodies, the social dependencies that all humans rely on in families and in societies constitute a different kind of ontological vulnerability, one that relies not on the body, but on social relations. This is in line with Butler’s view that vulnerability exceeds injurability (Butler 2009, pp. 54–62) and that, in addition to our injurable bodies, vulnerability has to do with a radical dependence on others (Butler 2009, pp. 19–20).

In this chapter, I will rely on previous research on disability in literature, while simultaneously drawing on the discussion about disability and vulnerability in other fields. More precisely, I will use disability as a critical position that reveals the vulnerability of fictional subjects in general,

rather than only those who are explicitly narrated as disabled. An important question to be considered from an interdisciplinary perspective is *why*, and perhaps also *how*, disability in fictional literature matters. In the introduction to their study about disability and sexuality, *Loneliness and Its Opposites* (2015), Kulick and Rydström juxtapose the work of ‘professors of literature’ focusing on ‘representation’ (p. 10) with disability studies dealing with actual people; for example, through interviews (a method employed by Kulick and Rydström themselves).

Departing from the contributions to the understanding of disability in the previously discussed research, I would argue that the separation between textual disability studies and disability studies that engage with policy and lived experience is unfortunate. In the words of Garland-Thomson, ‘representation informs the identity—and often the fate—of real people with extraordinary bodies’ (2017/1997, p. 15). Quayson also argues that the study of disability in fictional literature is not merely a question of aesthetics: the representation of disability ‘transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it’ (2007, p. 19). Narratives are powerful instruments for the consolidation of the normate, as well as being places where the normate can be challenged.

### *BABY JANE: VULNERABILITY, PRECARITY AND DEPENDENCE*

Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen had her international breakthrough with *Purge* (2008), which won the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2010. It was her third novel after *Stalin’s Cows* (2003) and *Baby Jane* (2005).<sup>1</sup> Oksanen often writes about political and patriarchal oppression. Both *Stalin’s Cows* and *Purge* are about the history of Estonia under Soviet occupation; however, the scene is changed in *Baby Jane*. This is a love story set in modern Helsinki between Piki, ‘the coolest dyke in Helsinki’, and a young woman who is the narrating ‘I’.

The novel is divided into five parts, all narrating different stages in the relationship between the narrator and Piki, although not in chronological order. In part I of the novel, the meeting with Piki is described. Part II narrates life after the break-up with Piki, as the narrator tries to adapt to a heterosexual middle-class life with her boyfriend Joonatan. Part III introduces Bossa, Piki’s ex-girlfriend, who also functions as her personal assistant, doing the shopping for her food and the washing-up. In part IV, the relationship between the narrator and Piki deteriorates due to



Piki's poor health and the narrator's jealousy of Bossa, resulting in the narrator stabbing Piki and injuring her badly. This is also the cause for the break-up that was narrated in part II. Part V describes how Piki's health deteriorates even more. She does not leave her home and is completely dependent on Bossa, who only brings her food occasionally. Piki asks the narrator to assist her suicide. The last pages make it clear that Piki was ultimately killed by Bossa with a blow to the head, but that the narrator has been convicted and is in prison for Piki's murder. This is the place and point in time from which the narrator tells her story.

In the first pages, the narrator describes her first impressions of Piki with amazement and awe. Piki is older and is well-known in lesbian circles, having plenty of self-confidence and sexual experience. Piki and the narrator become a couple and share a sense that anything is possible for them, despite their financial difficulties. Even within this phase of passion and happiness, the narrator plants some clues to the continuation: for example, Piki does not like to go to cafés or grocery shopping. In fact, she seldom leaves her home. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator states that, when they met, both had been diagnosed with severe depression. The narrator catalogues symptoms and medications, albeit in a normalized way. Among their friends, it was not uncommon to have a psychiatric condition, the narrator explains; 'almost everybody's mornings started with a number of pills' (Oksanen 2005, p. 28). Just as homosexuality is narrated as a norm in the world of Piki and the narrator, mental illness does not bear the stigma of disability, even if—as in Piki's case—it is impairing in reality.

The novel starts with a quote from the lyrics of Madonna's album 'True blue', thus immediately indicating to the reader that this is a love story. The novel's five parts all have a song lyric as a motto. These mottos change character as the plot moves on to a definite crisis: from Madonna's carefree love song, to 'The Ballad of Lucy Jordan', famously performed by Marianne Faithfull, which describes the mental breakdown and attempted suicide of a housewife (Dederer 2006). Just like the title references the 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, starring Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, the mottos function as interpretive clues for the reader. I will return to the film as an intertext later.

Quayson mainly reserves the category 'disability as normality' for autobiographies and biographies, but also includes texts where 'disability is used as a pointed critique of social hypocrisy' (2007, p. 52). This is, indeed, the case in *Baby Jane*. The retrospective composition of the story

allows for a juxtaposition of the world where women can love women; where you can be poor and depressed without people judging; with a middle-class, heterosexual world in which the narrator ends up after the relationship with Piki has ended. The contrast between these two worlds shows the difference between a world where you do not have to pass as normate—whether with regard to sexuality or ability—and a world ‘enforcing normalcy’, as Lennard J. Davis has expressed it (1995). Bérubé writes that Quayson’s category ‘disability as normality’ corresponds to Garland-Thomson’s ‘realistic’ mode of visual representation, in which ‘disability is simply itself, and not (in Garland-Thomson’s typology) wondrous, sentimental, or exotic’ (Bérubé 2016, p. 54).

However, the novel presents different ways of regarding deviations from the normate. In the middle-class, heterosexual world the narrator tries to move on to, homosexuality and depression must be hidden; however, this world provides the narrator with financial safety and a refuge from the parts of Helsinki where everything reminds her of Piki. The changed economic conditions in the heterosexual relationship with Joonatan cause the narrator to reflect on vulnerability in relation to the uneven distribution of resources: ‘With resources like this, Piki could have lived a comfortable life, been cared for by proper doctors and taken a taxi to the beach every night, if she wanted to’ (Oksanen 2005, p. 62). Piki’s life is fraught with precarity—that is, the normative constructions of the society she lives in place her in a position where employment and income are unreachable privileges. There is a price to the breaking of normative conceptions about sexuality and ability in the world of Piki and the narrator. Challenging the normate means placing oneself in a vulnerable position.

As a counter-example, there is Joonatan, the man the narrator moves in with after the end of her relationship with Piki. Adopting his way of life means moving from a position of precarity and vulnerability to a position of relative safety and compliance with norms. In effect, the novel is harsh in its critique of the oppression of the normate, by connecting health, resources and social agency with heterosexual normalcy, while illness, disability and poverty affect the homosexual community, which lives in what almost seems like a separate Helsinki that is removed from the privileges of the normate. In this novel, disability—in this case, psychiatric disability—can be read as part of a critique against the normate. In light of the theories about disability and vulnerability that have been previously presented, it is clear that disability is not used as a narrative prosthesis by

Oksanen. There is no stabilization of normality, and no recovery from or overcoming of disability—neither for Piki, who decides to end her life, nor for the narrator, who is deeply depressed in her relationship with Joonatan, and who eventually ends up in prison. It is a narrative of disintegration, rather than of recovery.

Even though disability is not stigmatized in the world of Piki, the novel seems to link psychiatric conditions to a patriarchal and heterosexual oppression paired with economic precarity, especially since Piki and the narrator begin to sell used underwear to heterosexual men in order to be able to support themselves. The world of Piki and the narrator cannot, then, just be understood as a free place where disability is normality (in Quayson's sense). It is clear that there is also an individual level. Piki has been ill for a long time, and is hiding the severity of her anxiety. Thus, 'disability as normality' is only true from the perspective of the narrator, and cannot be sustained when Piki's health deteriorates. Piki, herself, is ashamed of her condition. She hides it and will not admit that she depends on her ex-girlfriend, Bossa, to carry out her everyday chores.

It is within this relationship that the reference to the 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* makes sense. In the film, a paraplegic ex-movie star (Blanche, played by Joan Crawford) is held captive by her sister (Jane, played by Bette Davis), who was a famous vaudeville star as a child. Blanche's disability makes her completely dependent on her mentally unstable sister, who mistreats her and starves her. In Oksanen's text, Piki is indeed captive, like Blanche, in her own home, and it is the gradual revelation of this to the narrator that drives a wedge into their relationship. Both Bossa and Jane act as prison guards, and both use the strategy of limiting food to control and torment Piki and Blanche, respectively. Moreover, both put dead birds in the food in order to provoke a reaction of horror (Oksanen 2005, p. 209). In a dialogue, Piki also states that *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* is Bossa's favourite movie (Oksanen 2005, p. 170).

The narrator recognizes that Piki's loss of autonomy is not due to a disabling illness, but to Bossa's manipulation of her. Here, the novel follows the plot of the movie. Blanche's disability makes her vulnerable to the oppression of her sister, but she is not oppressed *because* she is disabled. Just as Jane oppresses Blanche out of envy of her career, Bossa oppresses Piki out of jealousy of her new girlfriends. However, while it is suggested that Blanche dies from starvation at the end of the film, Piki's

death is more violent. After the narrator stabs Piki in a bout of desperation, the relationship between the narrator and Piki is broken off for some time. When Piki makes contact again, she is in bad shape. Bossa has Piki's card and keys, and only brings Piki food occasionally. Piki demands that the narrator help her commit suicide, which she plans to do by taking medicine, putting a plastic bag over her head and taping it around her throat. The role of the narrator is to see to it that the suicide works, and then to deliver a letter to Bossa in order for the body to be found.

The fact that it transpires that it after all was Bossa who killed Piki reinforces the parallelism between Bossa and Jane. The intermedial relation between the film and the novel is on a separate level to the intermedial relations between the novel and the references to music previously mentioned. The latter can be seen as articulating feelings that are not explicitly formulated by the novel, while the film provides elements of the plot and points to the main theme of the novel: dependency and control. The reference to *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* as a psychological horror film also reinforces what could be called the 'horror' of vulnerability: the insight that the social and physical vulnerability that is unavoidable for all humans is a fearsome state that may expose us to physical and psychological suffering and exploitation.

Scully's critical assessment of 'the assumption that disabled people have special vulnerabilities' that set them apart from non-disabled people (2013, p. 205) may help us to understand disability and vulnerability in *Baby Jane*. In line with Scully, I argue that, in this novel, disability is not to be seen as an 'autonomy deficit' (Scully 2013, p. 212) represented by Piki's dependence on Bossa. I propose that the novel does not link disability to a special vulnerability. Rather, Piki is made especially vulnerable by the societal and psychological conditions: her already mentioned precarity, and her disabling at the hands of Bossa—that is, the constant affirmation of her inability to go outside or to manage everyday chores. Scully underlines the importance of examining exactly why people with disabilities are typically regarded as more vulnerable than non-disabled people. Impairments may cause vulnerabilities, but how this vulnerability is experienced is highly dependent on how society responds to it (2013, p. 217).

I argue that the novel *Baby Jane* questions the way of thinking about disability as a lack of autonomy. Piki's two most important relationships, the one with Bossa and the other with the narrator, present two different kinds of dependency: Piki's and the narrator's dependencies are mutual,

which is evident in the narrator's flashbacks during her relationship with Joonatan. With Piki, she wasn't a 'visitor in a relationship' and her 'hands felt at home' (Oksanen 2005, p. 59). Bossa, on the other hand, is not driven by love but, rather, by jealousy and a wish to control Piki. Here, dependency is, in fact, not directly produced by disability. Instead, it is the asymmetric relationship with Bossa that exposes Piki to threats to her physical health and reduces her autonomy, and (in the eyes of the narrator) worsens her psychiatric condition.

The narrator reflects on the severity of Piki's state, and concludes that it is the absence of proper treatment, such as therapy, and Bossa's interference that has worsened her condition (Oksanen 2005, p. 196). This conclusion is in line with Scully's statement that 'a high proportion of the vulnerabilities commonly associated with disability are therefore contingent rather than inherent, because they are secondary to a particular social response to impairment' (Scully 2013, p. 209). From a relational perspective, such as Scully argues for, social relations entail dependency, but also make autonomy possible. The narrator longs for a relationship with Piki in which they can be mutually dependent on one another. But, due to Bossa's continual confirmation of Piki's dependence, and to the many years of maltreatment (for example, through excessive prescription of medications), Piki and the narrator never succeed in realizing this autonomy through dependence.

### GRACE: VULNERABILITY, ILLNESS AND CONTROL

Like Oksanen, Norwegian Linn Ullmann is an acclaimed Nordic writer whose works have been translated into several languages. Her most recent novel, *Unquiet* (2019/2015) was nominated to the Nordic Council's Literature Prize. *Grace* was published in Norway in 2002 and received the literary award The Reader's Prize in Norway.

*Grace* is a short novel that describes the cancerous disease and subsequent death of Johan Sletten (simply referred to as 'Sletten' by the narrator), who is a former journalist in his late sixties. Various episodes of Sletten's life are narrated, such as his two marriages and his relationship with his son, who no longer wants to be in contact with him. Although the narrator lets us follow Sletten's thoughts and perceptions very closely, a distance is marked from time to time. One such occasion is on the very first page, when the narrator appears in the text by referring to Johan as 'my friend Johan Sletten' (Ullmann 2005, p. 3). However, from what the

narrator gives the reader to understand about Sletten, he hardly seems to have any friends.

The novel begins when a doctor informs Sletten that his condition is ‘alarming’ (Ullmann 2005, p. 3). Sletten’s vulnerability is immediately set in focus: he feels offended that the doctor addresses him by his first name, since he likes to maintain a certain distance with others and shuns intimacy between strangers. This insistence on dignity, propriety and autonomy is, as it turns out, connected to his desire to have control and not be vulnerable. In other words, his ideal is the neoliberal fantasy of an autonomous subject, free from vulnerability and dependence. He is in pursuit of invulnerability, one might say (Gilson 2014, pp. 75–76). When it is clear that the cancer has spread and cannot be cured, Sletten asks his wife, a doctor, to end his life in order to spare him the humiliation and shame of being a burden, a ‘vegetable’ (Ullmann 2005, p. 111). He wants to remain in control and not lose his autonomy. She initially recoils, even though she is pro-euthanasia in theory; eventually, however, she agrees.

There is a background to Sletten’s wish to control his death, which is presented in retrospect. Sletten’s father became ill and died when Sletten was a child. The night before his death, he was found ‘crawling naked on all fours through their neighbor’s garden, leaving a trail of shit behind him’ (Ullmann 2005, p. 24). When the father understands what has happened, he cries with shame and begs his wife not to leave him alone in his misery. She, however, closes the door and leaves; while Sletten’s father wails in his room, his mother and big sister cover Sletten’s ears with their hands until it stops (Ullmann 2005, p. 25)—that is, until his father dies. This event in Sletten’s childhood is presented by the narrator at the beginning of the novel. The question asked in this episode is: How vulnerable and disabled can a person become without losing their humanity in their own eyes and in the eyes of their fellow humans? Sletten’s answer to this question is that there is a possibility that the loss of certain bodily and cognitive abilities will rob you of your humanity and put an unreasonable burden on those close to you. This is the fate he wants to avoid, and the reason he asks his wife to end his life.

Although the idea of assisted suicide is at the core of the novel, it circles around situations in which people become vulnerable in different ways. After a 20-year-long unhappy marriage, Sletten loses his first wife, Alice, in a car crash. Sletten had wished for her to die, and had once pushed her from a jetty into the water although she couldn’t swim. The situation on the jetty involved an element of trust: you trust your family members

not to take advantage of your vulnerability. However, in this case, Sletten does just that—he takes advantage of his wife’s vulnerability, not intentionally to kill her, but to experience a sense of control in a relationship in which he feels dominated. By transgressing trust in this way, he exposes his wife to her vulnerability and dependence on him, the kind of ‘permitted dependency’ in families that, according to Scully (2013, p. 217), is naturalized and viewed as unproblematic. In this episode, however, it is exposed and to some extent de-naturalized.

Sletten saves his wife from drowning, and they recover from this episode in their lives; but then, the narrator states abruptly, ‘as luck would have it, she was run over’ (Ullman 2005, p. 11), making the frailty of human life the centre of attention again. Sletten’s son by his first wife is described as ‘transparent and brittle’ (Ullman 2005, p. 12). His second child with Mai, his second wife, is aborted because the foetus is injured. Sletten thinks of the baby as a child—his child—while his wife calls it ‘defective’ and ‘deformed’ (Ullmann 2005, pp. 38–39). Her rationale is that she cannot bear to give birth to it, and that Sletten had not even been able to take care of a healthy child, and could not be expected to manage a disabled one. But Sletten thinks of the baby’s little heart, pumping twenty-eight litres of blood every night and day. Mai, being a physician by profession, represents a medical and rational perspective instead.

In all these retrospectives, which are brought about by Sletten’s disease, human vulnerability is the common denominator. Although disability is not foregrounded in this narrative, vulnerability is, in different ways: in addition to vulnerability as illness, in the case of Sletten’s father and Sletten himself, the narrative puts forward an ontological vulnerability that is shared by all humans, as well as the ethical challenges to life constituted by euthanasia and abortion.

As Sletten’s condition worsens, his body starts to change. He has a disfiguring boil on his face ‘transforming him, even in his own eyes, into a monster with two heads, one big and one little, that scared other people away’ (Ullmann 2005, p. 44). This description can be read as an allusion to Pascal Pinon, who was both a historical person and the two-headed circus ‘monster’ in Per Olof Enquist’s well-known novel *Downfall. A Love Story* (1985). As in Enquist’s novel, the second head has a life of its own in *Grace*:

Sometimes it was huge, pulsating and purple as an eggplant; sometimes it was pallid and lackluster. Like a newborn infant, it had to be tended and

soothed. It was drained of fluid, smeared with salves, and occasionally even swathed with bandages.

He once claimed to have been woken by the sound of the boil crying.  
(Ullmann 2005, pp. 44–45)

When Sletten looks at himself in the mirror, he imagines that the boil grins at him (Ullmann 2005, p. 62). His body is not his own, and is revolting against what he perceives as himself—largely, a disembodied self. It is also clear from the episode with the mirror that Sletten has incorporated a particular way of looking at deformity as monstrosity, which could be distinguished as ‘exotic’ from Garland-Thomson’s (2002) four types of visual rhetoric (i.e. the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic and the realistic). The exotic ‘presents disabled figures as alien, distant’, and is characterized by ‘curiosity or uninvolved objectification’ (Garland-Thomson 2002, p. 65). On the one hand, Sletten separates himself from his—in his own eyes—deformed body, thus objectifying it. On the other hand, the body refuses to be objectified, and demands care and attention. His body looks back at him. This signifies a transformation of Sletten’s understanding of himself. His dream of being autonomous and able to exercise control over his body can no longer be upheld.

Sletten’s gradually progressing illness also brings him in contact with the vulnerability of others. He thinks about his father, the unborn child and situations in which his son, Andreas, needed help, but in which Sletten couldn’t face Andreas’s vulnerability. This confrontation with vulnerability—his own and that of others—transforms Sletten. Even though, at the beginning of his illness, Sletten was convinced that he wanted his wife to end his life, by the end, his desire is not so clear. When Mai says that it is time, Sletten wants to protest but cannot make her hear him. Although the novel by no means explicitly takes sides in the question of assisted suicide, it is possible to read his wife’s commitment to her promise as being as rational and medical as her decision to end her pregnancy. Even though Sletten sees himself as a monster in one stage of his illness, by the end, his disabled and vulnerable condition does not prevent him from trying to defend his life and experiencing its value.

In *Vulnerable Subjects*, Couser (2004) discusses what he names ‘euthanography’; that is, ‘narratives in which euthanasia (in any form) is considered, but not necessarily enacted’ (p. 124). He uses this concept in the context of life writing—more precisely, in narratives by suicide assistants, whose stories are ‘determined by their complicity in the death



they narrate' (Couser, p. 125). *Grace*, however, is not primarily narrated from the point of view of Sletten's wife, although the narrator informs the reader about the aftermath. Mai calls up the doctor in charge of Sletten and admits to the assisted suicide, while being prepared to be handed over to the police. However, both agree to keep it a secret instead. Then Mai sits by Sletten's bed for a while, but feels that there is no point. 'What was it that she wanted? To hear him say that it was good finally to rest?' (Ullmann 2005, p. 130).

Couser (2004) argues that, in order to be 'rhetorically compelling and ethically satisfying, euthanography must present the suicide as rational, autonomous, and uncoerced' (p. 125). Representations in a novel are not subject to the same rhetorical constraints. In *Grace*, despite the previous discussions between Sletten and his wife—which may be taken as proof of a rational, un-coerced and autonomous decision—this is not quite how it plays out. Sletten experiences his perception changing, and floats in and out of consciousness. When Mai speaks to him, he understands that she cannot hear his answer. When Mai asks him 'It is time... isn't it?' (Ullmann 2005, p. 127), referring to the promise that she has made to him, Sletten has lost the ability to communicate. He cannot say the words to Mai that are nevertheless communicated to the reader: 'Don't, Mai! Not yet! Please! Wait till it grows light' (Ullmann 2005, p. 128).

The narration of Sletten's last moments at the hospital seems to confirm that he has moved beyond the ideas of autonomy, control and dignity. His vulnerability did not make him less human, but made him value life more. The illness brings disabilities that Sletten resents, but ultimately opens up a new ability as well: for the first time, Sletten is able to experience and acknowledge his own and others' vulnerability without resentment. This ability was not accessible to him when he was an able-bodied man, governed by his pride and principles. In this text, vulnerability and disability thus have a transformative power. Sletten finally develops a new sense of self-worth that does not depend on dignity, decency and control, but on a sense that he values his life, despite how circumscribed it has become.

## CONCLUSION

I have taken as my starting point an ontological understanding of vulnerability and an understanding of disabled people not as a separate group with separate needs, but as people who are more likely to be disabled by

societal norms due to their impairments. As is shown by the reading of *Baby Jane* and *Grace*—two novels that do not explicitly represent disability as a theme—a focus on vulnerability helps to disrupt the idea of ‘the disabled’ as a separate group and as a specific theme in literature. Both novels engage in the experience of vulnerability and of becoming disabled in the eyes of oneself and others. Both also bring to the fore questions of dependency and autonomy—that is, relational aspects of vulnerability and disability.

In the case of *Baby Jane*, the title can be taken as a paratextual indication that the narrative somehow concerns disability; it guides the reader to understand imprisonment and dependence as main themes that are common to the film and the novel. Although the precarity caused by different transgressions of normalcy, such as homosexuality, seems partly to explain the psychiatric disorders experienced not only by Piki, but also by the narrator and many of their friends, this is not the whole explanation. The interpretation of the narrator is that Piki’s dependency on Bossa, whose controlling ‘help’ is disabling Piki, is another important factor in the deterioration of her condition. In *Grace*, Sletten has to rid himself of the illusion that he can be autonomous and in control, and gradually come to terms with his, and others’, vulnerability. As his illness progresses, Sletten passes through a stage in which he objectifies his own body. He sees his body as a monster, which can be described as the able-bodied fear of the disabled body. In the end, though, he still values his life, despite his suffering and loss of control and dignity.

Both stories end in death. In the case of Piki, she plans her death as a suicide assisted by the narrator, but it ends in murder. When it comes to Sletten, the planned voluntary euthanasia becomes involuntary instead, when Sletten can no longer communicate. In *Grace*, this act is initially presented as a wish to escape humiliation and dependency on Sletten’s part, while his wife is motivated by rational arguments to relieve suffering. In *Baby Jane*, the planned assisted suicide can be seen as manipulated by Bossa, who leaves Piki with no other option. In both cases, death as a subjective decision by Piki and Sletten is contradicted by how their lives are actually ended: by the violent intervention of others.

Both stories engage in a critique against what Garland-Thomson calls ‘the normate’. Sletten initially equates his value as a human being with the fulfilling of certain norms of autonomy and dignity. His illness means a transgression of these norms, exposing him to his own and to others’ vulnerability. In *Baby Jane*, the normate is critically examined through the

juxtaposition of middle-class heteronormativity with the economic and social precarity in Piki's social circle.

Disability as a narrative prosthesis is very common in fiction—for example, I would argue, in the portrayal of the autism-spectrum detective Saga Norén in *Bron/Broen*. She is used as a 'crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight' (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 49), thus shedding light on the good and bad sides of postmodern normalcy. Disability in the two texts discussed here is, instead, a consequence of normalcy. Therefore, disability can be read as a critical position that reveals the vulnerability of subjects in general, not only of those who are explicitly narrated as disabled.

## NOTE

1. Since *Baby Jane* has not been translated into English, the translations of quotations in this chapter are mine. There is no translation to English of *Stalin's Cows*, either. I have used the same translation of the title as is used on Oksanen's webpage, <http://www.sofioksanen.com/books/stalinin-lehmat/>. Accessed 9 June 2019.

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