Disability and “Chastened Merriment”: Queer Joy in Theodore Winthrop’s *Cecil Dreeme*

Theodore Winthrop’s novel *Cecil Dreeme*, first published after Winthrop died in 1861—is, according to Christopher Looby, quote, “a very queer book indeed,” endquote. Here I argue that the novel offers significant opportunities for study of disability, queer desire, and joy from nineteenth-century America to today.

I’ll begin with a quick overview of the (complicated) plot. In the novel, the first-person narrator Robert Byng (who seems to be partially based on author Winthrop himself) admires and cares for the painter Cecil Dreeme, who is experiencing an emotional crisis. Byng sees Dreeme as quote “a man of genius, ardent, poor and nursing a wound.” Byng later describes Dreeme as “part of my heart” and claims their love is “more precious than the love of women,” “intimate,” “a love passing the love of women.” Endquote. However, at the end of the novel, Cecil Dreeme reveals she is a woman, Clara Denman, who presented as male to escape a cruel male antagonist, Densdeth. Cecil/Clara’s mental illness worsened after she self-isolated for self-protection. [I will largely use he/him pronouns to describe Cecil, in keeping with Byng’s narration, because Byng clearly gendered Cecil as male and wanted him to stay that way. However, I also use she/her pronouns, when the character identifies as Clara.] The villain Densdeth finds Clara and tries to put her in an asylum as retribution for the romantic rejection. After Byng dramatically rescues Cecil Dreeme from the asylum, he is disappointed to discover that Cecil is Clara in disguise. He promises that the two of them will remain friends as close as siblings. Though *Cecil Dreeme* was
written before the term “homosexuality” was first used in print in 1869, it can be analyzed as a
queer novel without fear of anachronism, for Byng’s love is a driving force throughout. This
complex plot offers rich opportunities to explore issues from queer crip theory.

I read *Cecil Dreeme* with what be called a *crip reading* practice. Building off the work of
scholars like Margaret Price, Robert McRuer, and Michael Berubé, I do not aimlessly strive to
diagnose the particulars of Dreeme’s mental illness. Instead, I ask how we might read *Cecil
Dreeme* to examine how the stigma often associated with disability and heteronormative/ableist
ideologies can be used to theorize how normalcy is represented within texts. This resonates with
Sari Altschuler’s recent definition of historical cripistemology, a method that quote “centers the
embodied experiences and epistemologies of disability in particular times and places to help us
understand literary and cultural landscapes anew.” Endquote. I’m especially interested in
contemporary disability theorist Alison Kafer’s call that scholars should attempt to quote,
“critically trace the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and
compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity” endquote. With this study
of the compulsory, we may consider how discourses of defectiveness are employed to justify
oppression of quote “people whose bodies, minds, desires, and practices differ from the
unmarked norm.” endquote. I take up this call to think about how Robert Byng and Cecil Dreeme
diverge from intertwining norms of heterosexuality and able-mindedness, and also find joy.

At first glance, “joy” might not seem the right way to think about the novel’s depiction of
queerness and mental illness. One character, Emma Denman, dies by completing suicide at the end
of the story. Dreeme also openly struggles. At one point, Byng remarks, “Suffering, like
pain, I suppose is to be borne heroically, until it passes off. Every man has his hard times.”
Dreeme replies, “You are not cruel, but you talk cruelly on a subject you hardly understand.”
Endquote. Not only does Byng not understand Dreeme’s suffering, but also Byng does not know that the phrase “every man has had his hard times,” reads differently for Dreeme. Clara Denman presented as male, hid in a room, and stopped eating all because of Densdeth’s cruel pursuit. When alone and endangered, Dreeme insists that illness was caused by “sins not my own.” He feels the effects of “confinement, solitude, and perhaps mental trouble,” stating, “Overwork and anxiety were killing me, without my knowledge…and that solitude of the heart which is the brother of death…I have been struggling with dark waters…I felt myself sink away, and seemed to drown, slowly, slowly, without pain or terror. Immeasurable deeps of space crushed me.” This depiction of mental illness recollects what scholar of affect Ann Cvetkovich has termed a [quote] “manifestation of forms of biopower that produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction…but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless.” Endquote. Dreeme’s narrative attests to the hopelessness that may harm those who survive by living outside of normative bounds.

The loss of joy in the novel makes clear that although mental illness need not be constantly associated with tragedy, illness can involve embodied pain that we as disability scholars must acknowledge. We can celebrate disability and joy, and yet remain cognizant of the heartbreak that results from oppression. That said, for today, I will focus on the joys that shine at the heart of the story. To explore the relationships between queer and crip joy, I focus on a rich scene of oyster eating that follows Cecil Dreeme’s emotional crisis. The scene centers queer intimacy, bodily pleasure, and gastronomical delight, providing relief from the restraints of compulsory able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality found elsewhere in the world of the novel. By reading this scene, I show that the novel presents restorative scenes that reaffirm joy for characters whose mental illnesses result from that marginalizing treatment.
When fellow apartment-dweller Robert Byng and landlord Key Locksley find Dreeme unconscious in his room, they intervene, but notably, they refrain from calling a doctor. Byng suggests they try, quote, “Fire first. Then doctor—if [Dreeme] does not revive” endquote. The doctor remains an invisible, unneeded figure in the scene, secondary to warmth both physical and social. Byng and Locksley instead prepare an oyster dinner to care for Dreeme. As one character, Churm, puts it in another part of the novel, “Life should be a feast, not a medicine.” Endquote. The novel depicts mental illnesses as natural consequences of forced isolation [something that resonates with us during today’s pandemic] and suggests that physicians and alienists use violent curative methods that may worsen individual experiences. The novel offers gastronomical delights as an alternative to those medical methods.

Byng feels drawn to Dreeme while he gives the painter alcoholic drinks, indicating the novel’s understanding of the link between desiring and caring. Byng finds a bottle of port, which he describes with fondness over six full sentences. We learn, quote, “Every grape had felt the round sun gazing straight and steadily at it, and enjoying his countenance within, as a lover loves to see his own image reflected in his lady's eye…An unexpected picture for mid-nineteenth century…a strange picture!—this dark-haired, wasted youth, robed like a sick prince, and taking his posset from a goblet.” Endquote. Byng obviously enjoys this “unexpected…strange picture” of himself caring for the “sick prince.” Byng begins to figuratively quote “doctor” Dreeme by providing a “little dose” of brandy. At that moment, Byng thought, quote “‘Incognito has nearly murdered him…how can I doctor him intelligently without feeling the pulse of his soul by studying his face?’” (endquote). Upon gazing at Dreeme—a moment that parallels the image of the lover reflected in the port—Byng thinks to himself, “The world does not willingly let such faces die. I myself feel the need of you.” The scene thus depicts feelings in Cvetkovich’s terms,
as quote “embodied sensations” and “psychic or cognitive experiences” that draw people together in intimate moments and motivate them to protect life.

After Byng had this revelation, Locksley insists that food—specifically, oysters—will act as a remedy, suggesting the novel’s usual crustacean-based approach to illness and sorrow alike. Locksley declares, quote “Air he’s got…and fire he’s got, and a friend he’s got; now for some food for him!…An oyster is all the world in one bite.” [later he adds], “I’ve got a sick man to oyster up, and if he ain’t oystered up on time he’ll be a dead shell” endquote. Locksley initiates what is called an “orgie” endquote, (explaining why the chapter is titled “a mild orgie”).

Locksley brings in such a huge supply of oysters that Byng frets, saying quote, "You will appall Mr. Dreeme's invalid appetite with these piles of provender." Dreeme, who had awakened, replied, "On the contrary…my spirits rise with the sight of a banquet and guests to share it."

Endquote. This scene of food and companionship is then sexualized. Locksley eagerly quote “grappled the crustaceous grandee with the tongs, and popped him on a plate. A little fragrant steam issued from the calcined lips, invitingly parted…‘This is a bulger,’ he continued, deftly whisking off the top shell.” (Notably, Dreeme was compared to a shell earlier). Locksley then quote “stood seductively holding up the neat morsel” endquote.

Critics of Cecil Dreeme have thus far mostly ignored this oyster scene, which possibly best illustrates the novel’s coexisting signs of queerness, illness, and joy. Oysters often symbolize amorous desire—and female genitalia. This moment—featuring “invitingly parted” lips—could be said to foreshadow the reveal of Dreeme’s “true” gender. That oysters can hide a pearl also might suggest this reading. However, oysters were also thought to improve male fertility. The 1771 Encyclopedia Britannica claimed aphrodisiacs like oysters were “medicines to increase the quantity of seed.” Further, Locksley gives the oyster a “him” pronoun. He describes
a steamed oyster as “a bulger”—a term sometimes used to describe male genitalia. Furthermore, oysters, including the varieties eaten in this scene, can change their reproductive organs. Male oysters can change to females after they spawn, then some females change back to males again. Oysters’ powers for sex transformation were known in the nineteenth century. The scene therefore occludes any easy understanding of oysters, or people, as female or male.

The “seductively” presented oyster “orgie” blends the political and the pleasurable together as the characters enjoy the sweetness of a sympathetic bond, finding communion in what Lauren Berlant calls quote “everyday act of eating.” Byng and Locksley check in with Dreeme several times to make sure that the painter still wants their company and food. Upon confirmation, Locksley then began, quote, “forking out a little oyster of pearly complexion from where it lay…among its fellows.” This imagery of forking a little white oyster laying among “fellows” is pretty suggestive. Locksley’s quote “earnestness, as he stood seductively holding up the neat morsel, was so comic, that Dreeme let himself laugh heartily.” Endquote. Byng then spends thirteen sentences basking in Dreeme’s laughter. Dreeme’s “silver laugh flowed free in chastened merriment.” Endquote. While the common definition of chastened means “to correct,” it also means “To refine,” or “To restrain from excess.” Dreeme and Byng later describe their “orgie” as “mild” and “gentle,” a sharp contrast to the villain Densdeth’s excessive pursuit of pleasures, which had disgusted Byng in earlier scenes. Byng says, “I was freshened again, and tuned anew to all sweet influences….All the brave joyousness of my nature responded to this laugh of Dreeme's…Each of us perceived new sympathy in the other.” Endquote. The laughter scene makes clear that Byng’s first-person narration involves his homoerotic interpretation of the events. After a moment, Locksley, quote, “made his reappearance with the volcano. The oysters crackled in the stove, fizzed and bubbled over the lamp on the table….Dreeme expanded more
and more.” Endquote. The way Byng connects the volcanic oysters that overflow up and over a lamp to Dreeme’s so-called expansion suggests Byng’s delight in imagining sexual *jouissance*. Byng reacts to his own quote “brave joyousness”—brave, perhaps, because he is delighting in residing outside the heteronormative confines maintained in other parts of the story.

In my reading of this scene, I don’t claim these oysters, alcohols, company, and laughter *cure* or eliminate Dreeme’s mental illness, which could be considered an ongoing or chronic experience for the character. (In fact, I could say based on later parts of the novel that the joy here stands in contrast to the cruel treatment of the novel’s asylum.) This orgie rather attests to the *coexistence* of mental illness and joy. As the oyster feast helps Dreeme, it also delights Byng. The following day, Byng says that Dreeme’s, quote, “personal magnetism—that is, the touch of his soul on mine—affectted me more keenly than before. It was having cumulative influence. The mighty medicines for soul and body always do.” Endquote. Byng later tells Dreeme on a nighttime walk, “Of all the men I have ever known, your society charms me most *penetratingly*. These walks with you, since that famous oyster supper…have been the chief feature of my life.” Endquote. The joy of the oyster feast made Dreeme laugh during a time of mental exhaustion. Further, it allowed Byng the freedom to explore and delight in the personal magnetism he felt towards a person he thought a man—something he found restorative.

The novel’s final twist, Cecil turning out to be Clara in disguise, highlights the difficulty of making same-sex intimacy public at the time of Winthrop’s writing. The twist may seem a return to heteronormalcy, a plot shift that makes it impossible for Byng to love Cecil as a man. However, this does not negate the queerness of the story. Clara/Cecil queers expectations of gender and sexuality throughout the novel. Byng, meanwhile, openly longs for male-male attachments. In fact, after Byng learns Clara is not male, he nevertheless continues to refer to his
beloved as “Cecil,” exchanging he/him and she/her pronouns in his narration throughout the novel’s final chapters as if Clara/Cecil were in fact a transformative oyster.

The existence of Cecil Dreeme is a dream come true, an opportunity for same-sex desire to be celebrated, and Byng’s love for Cecil is never extinguished. Through its representation of disability and queerness, *Cecil Dreeme* expresses a past continuous with our present. The oyster scene takes place privately, due to the isolation created by Densdeth’s pursuit and Dreeme’s resulting anxiety. That privacy offers a chance for characters to defy the compulsory heteronormativity and compulsory able-mindedness of mid-nineteenth-century America and today. With that scene, the novel depicts medicine as one of many approaches to caring for someone with a mental illness. It teaches us to not be too quick to search for biological markers of diagnosable illness or gender identity, for that diagnostic approach could drive a character to a dangerous asylum or other institution. Further, the novel indicates that people who experience disability, chronic pain, insanity, and mental illness, people who feel desire that differs from heteronormative expectations, are not bound to tragedy. They feel a merriment that is refined and purified, when they are in the presence of people who care. Thank you.