

Rewriting Disability: Autobiography, Eugenics, and the Rise of the Disability Rights Movement

This paper aims to analyze two significant autobiographical works—Clifford Beers' *A Mind That Found Itself* (1908) and Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* (1954)—by situating them within the broader historical and ideological contexts of the early and mid-twentieth century, particularly the period shaped by the two World Wars. Literature and popular media have long portrayed people with disabilities through reductive and harmful stereotypes, often framing them as objects of pity, fear, charity, or moral failure rather than as individuals who possess agency and voice. These representations were deeply influenced by dominant social ideologies, most notably the eugenics movement, which reached its peak during the interwar years. Eugenics promoted the belief that disability signified biological “unfitness” and posed a threat to social progress, leading to policies of segregation, institutionalization, and forced sterilization. Against this oppressive backdrop, autobiographical narratives by disabled individuals emerged as powerful counter-discourses that challenged prevailing assumptions about disability and humanity.

Clifford Beers' *A Mind That Found Itself* (1908) was published at a time when mental illness was profoundly stigmatized and psychiatric institutions were often characterized by neglect, violence, and inhumane treatment. Beers' narrative offers a firsthand account of his experiences with mental illness and his confinement in various asylums, exposing the brutal realities of institutional life and the dehumanization of patients labeled as “insane.” By documenting his suffering as well as his recovery, Beers reframes mental illness not as a moral or biological defect but as a human condition deserving of compassion, understanding, and reform. His autobiography played a crucial role in reshaping public discourse around mental health and directly contributed to early mental health reform movements, thereby challenging the authority of medical and social systems that upheld eugenic ideologies.

Published in the post–World War II era, Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* (1954) reflects a different yet related moment in the history of disability representation. Brown, an Irish writer and painter born with cerebral palsy, narrates his childhood and development in a society that largely underestimated and marginalized people with physical disabilities. The autobiography focuses on Brown's discovery of his ability to write and paint using his left foot, emphasizing perseverance, creativity, and self-expression. While the narrative acknowledges the limitations imposed by his condition and by societal attitudes, it also reflects changing perceptions of disability in the aftermath of the war, when ideas of rehabilitation, social inclusion, and human rights began to gain greater prominence. Brown's work resists portrayals of disabled individuals as passive dependents, instead asserting intellectual and artistic agency.

This paper further explores how autobiography as a literary genre in the early twentieth century functioned as a means of subverting traditional narratives of pity, tragedy, and abnormality that surrounded disability. By allowing disabled individuals to speak for themselves, autobiographical writing disrupted dominant representations imposed by medical, charitable, and eugenic discourses. These personal narratives also intersect with the broader disability rights movement, which gained significant momentum during the 1960s and 1970s and laid the foundation for future activism centered on equality, accessibility, and self-representation. A key scholarly work relevant to this discussion is Douglas C. Baynton's *Defectives in the Land*, which examines how eugenic thought shaped national policies and cultural attitudes toward disability in the early twentieth century. By situating *A Mind That Found Itself* and *My Left Foot* within the historical contexts of eugenics and the World Wars, this analysis reveals how these autobiographies not only challenged dominant narratives of disability but also contributed to the ideological groundwork of the modern disability rights movement.