GROWING CROOKED:
DISABILITY, QUEERNESS, AND THE AMERICAN CHILD

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, DC
May 1, 2012
As Frankie says in *The Member of the Wedding*, “‘It is so very queer,’ she said. ‘The way it all just happened,’” and I cannot help but agree in regards to this wonderfully crooked thesis. Though the following pages may counter this statement, I am not the most comfortable expressing myself in the written word, but I must take the time to dedicate this thesis—

To my parents and family for their constant support.

To Maeg Keane, who first bent my perspective and helped inspire this project.

To Leona Fisher, for her guidance, encouragement, friendship, endless hours of editing (and chatting), and home cooked lunches. Congratulations on your retirement; I’m honored to be your last advisee.

To all those unnamed but unforgotten for your presence in my life; I appreciate you all.

And to John, who has been, is, and will be all the things, all the time, in my life.
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“It is so very queer,” she said. “The way it all just happened.”

Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding

“This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers”:
Crookedness and the American Narrative

In her novel The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison recounts the life of Pecola Breedlove. While the novel traces her coming-of-age story, Pecola never really grows up; instead, she grows crooked. Historically America has constituted and circulated a narrative paradigm about itself. America possesses a national fantasy—of whiteness, wholeness, straightness—and America invests that fantasy in the body of the child, a figure of the future. Thus only certain coming-of-age stories can be sanctioned (or even acknowledged) to uphold this progress-centered, self-making cultural process. Pecola, a poor, black girl, lies between the lines of this national narrative. America relies on constructed figures of “otherness” like Pecola to support privileged norms. Despite this reliance, American society still oppresses Pecola for not reproducing American norms and thus not being “American.” This societal imposition leads Pecola to uncritically internalize the damaging American narrative from which she is excluded. Pecola yearns for blue eyes and the American ideals these represent; she wants to be accepted, to “Be Mary Jane” (50). Therefore, she may not grow up, as the avenue to progress and growth in America is closed to her; instead, under the internal and external pressure to conform to norms, she goes mad.

Morrison challenges America’s belief in its progress through social and physical reproduction and the means by which America sustains its narrative. By exposing the forceful imposition of the “normalized” American narrative and its negative influence on children, the population for whom America ostensibly seeks to preserve this narrative, Morrison invites
criticism and revision of America’s fantasy through her novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, America is sterile. Flowers will not bloom, and neither Pecola nor her fetus will grow. Claudia, who stands in for Morrison, comments at the conclusion of the novel, “It was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers” (206). The “entire country,” America, and its “soil,” white-dominated society, reject certain flowers, which stand in for non-normative children and their narratives. Not only is the earth unyielding, but also Claudia claims she and her sister had never thought to consider that it may be the earth’s fault and not their own that their flowers would not bloom. America incriminates non-normative children to the extent that they do not interrogate the narrative but rather self-destructively interrogate themselves as to why they do not and cannot fit (or have the bluest eyes).

But what about children who are not straight—physically, mentally, sexually, racially, or economically? For children who do not fit this narrative, how do they construct an identity? How may they order their lives when they are, in the nation’s opinion, out of order? If they do not fall under the nation’s definition of childhood, they are shut out of childhood itself. With childhood comes a sense of order: a biological, social, and metaphorical developmental path to take place within the bounded sanctioned space of society and its accessible geography (the school house, the middle-class domestic home, the church). So when crooked children recognize this order from which culture excludes them, how can they order their lives, and not follow the traditional, fatalistic path of becoming normalized or expelled?

The purpose of this thesis is to answer this question imaginatively by calling for an act of will, a call to “read crookedly.” In this thesis, I am proposing and performing a new reading
methodology; I will bend myself to look askance at “crooked” children like Pecola and to interrogate both the actual circumstances of their lives and the desired effect of their queer disabled childhoods, which oppose and undermine American ideals concerning childhood and nationhood. One might think that literary representations of children would present and promote the idealized child—white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied—particularly in times of American turmoil and solidarity, such as during the rapid social and economic changes at the industrialized turn of the century and war-wrought early 20th century; instead, in texts by William Faulkner, Henry James, Carson McCullers, and Sherwood Anderson, children are crooked. Children do not grow “straight” or “up” in a linear, normative fashion; life provides bends or angles, and childhood is a state that may be (re)entered throughout one’s life, depending on conditions (or lack thereof).

To “read crooked” necessitates a re-reading of traditional literary narratives of childhood, especially when in these narratives non-normative children are expected to “grow out” of their crookedness or be expelled from the text through death or erasure. Instead I am proposing that we read these texts in the light of recent theoretical work in queer theory, disability studies, and childhood studies and alongside the historically and culturally situated normative American ideal. In considering the fruitful relationship between queer theory and disability studies, Mark Sherry has remarked, “In the same way that social model theorists have pointed to the dominant culture as responsible for the creation of disabling environments and attitudes, some queer theorists have pointed to the way in which the dominant culture and its family environment are responsible for creating inequalities in public access to various forms of pleasures and possibilities” (775). Building upon these relationships, by bringing historiocultural context, queer
theory, disability studies, and child culture into dialogue with one another, I intend to consider the ways in which society constructs children as sites of representation and thus affects the “possibilities and pleasures” available to children and to the country as a whole.

The Concept of Crookedness

“Crooked,” like “disabled,” “queer,” and “child,” carries certain, usually negative, implications; therefore I will define each term as well as the intersections between and among them. In her book The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century, Kathryn Bond Stockton problematizes the concept of “growing up” and replaces it with a more fluid, liminal idea of “growing sideways,” allowing for non-traditional experiences and expressions. Similarly, I seek to replace “growing up” with “growing crooked.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines crooked as

1. Bent from the straight form; having (one or more) bends or angles; curved, bent, twisted, tortuous, wry. Applied to everything which is not ‘straight’ (of which crooked is now the ordinary opposite).
2. Of persons: Having the body or limbs bent out of shape; deformed; bent or bowed with age.
3. The reverse of “straight” in figurative senses (esp. with reference to moral character and conduct); deviating from rectitude or uprightness; not straightforward; dishonest, wrong, perverse; perverted, out of order, awry.
4. In a crooked course or position; not straight.
Each of these definitions applies in some sense to my consideration of disabled child queers. One should keep in mind that my definition, as well as the understanding of queerness, disability, and children, is socially constituted, rather than derived from any distinct identity or inherent fact.

*Childhood is tortuous.* Elliot West explains the early American understanding of the development of children with a metaphor that echoes Morrison’s explanation: “They came into the world like seeds of mature individuals, it was thought; and the job of parents and society was to provide good soil for their growth and to prune and trim them so they would grow up straight and well shaped” (1). While children are expected to follow a certain biological, temporal, and teleological trajectory—puberty, school, marriage, work, reproduction, death—persons rarely follow this socially ordained path. Seldom following this “straight” development, children travel a crooked course, not progressing in a strictly forward motion and often returning to childhood throughout life. Society views this crookedness as problematic because children serve as the means by which to order time. In doing so, they regulate life and represent “progress.” Elizabeth Freeman, in *Time Binds*, proposes “chrononormativity,” the means by which institutional apparatuses (like marriage or schooling) and national narratives impose a teleological order to life directed by a naturalized, linear map of life’s progress. As the starting point of this progress, and an eventual goal (in reproduction and the continuation of this process), childhood serves as an integral part of this national temporal managing, despite childhood being an ideologically constructed temporal state. Without childhood, this narrative could not function. Chrononormativity, as a national script, additionally possesses a certain moral and socioeconomic element in terms of productivity; therefore, crooked children, those who fall
outside of national expectations in terms of ability or gender/sexuality, must be regulated to this heteronormative time, or removed from the order altogether.

*Childhood is deformed.* Independence, defined in the American consciousness by an ability to take care of oneself and participate in the American society and marketplace, excludes those with disabilities. America achieves wholeness through individual independence and the unity developed through this collective belief. This wholeness manifests itself at the level of the individual, stemming from a normative family (which demands a functioning body and mind in order to connect with the opposite sex, to physically reproduce, and to maintain a job) that reproduces American ideology. Dominant culture marks disabled people as unable to possess this American-ness and marginalizes them. While many understand disability as being written on the body, as perceivable deformity or lack within a body, disability is actually a cultural construction. In the cultural imaginary, weakness or difference is determined in comparison to an ideal body, rather than in terms of any actual lack of ability. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, “Disability is the systematic social interpretation of some bodies as abnormal, rather than any physical features” (22). Even when a disability is biologically palpable, the social evaluation of that disability can be argued as a dismissal of certain abilities and/or a privileging of some abilities over others. Gender affects the meaning inscribed into these cultural texts (bodies), and conditions figured as disabilities are commonly manifestations of gender non-normativity, as in effeminate, impotent men or vigorous, wild women.

*Childhood is perverse.* Arguably the basic nature of childhood is out of order: no children can or do fulfill adults’ expectations for them. Since no children live out the heteronarrative, children are necessarily queered by being outside of time from the beginning. By not following
the linear narrative, children, especially crooked children, fall out of the socially constructed temporal order, and therefore out of time itself, leaving children stranded outside the teleological loop and searching (often unsuccessfully) for a way to re-enter that order or to construct a separate order. Also, childhood serves only as a step in temporal narrative, so childhood itself, as it stands in for a stage of development and a placeholder for national ideals concerning development, is bereft of presentness and thus subjecthood. Discourses surrounding childhood construct it as a “becoming” rather than a “being.” As Susan Honeyman explains, “We imply the same dismissal (of children’s present selfhood) through common rituals like asking children, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’” (1). Children represent the unlimited possibilities of the future and fantasies of the past, but possess little meaning in the present, and thus are queer (worthless, suspect, strange). Michael Cobb explains this temporal role of children accurately:

Children are forced to do some incredible things. They are, as we all know, required to represent our future, by which we mean that they have futures we can’t yet account for, but futures for which we nonetheless hold out hope. But children are also tokens of the past, they remind us, perhaps, of when in our own histories we were young, of how we all made a tour through childhood, and of how that tour was laced with nostalgic goodness or traumatic horror, or some combination of both. Children, that is, remind us of time. But timing isn’t everything, and so children are also forced to solicit our anxieties, our delights, our ethics, our love, or really any form of our attention, especially when politics and moral values are made an issue. In fact, when it comes down to it, and it
always seems to come down to it, children can be most anything, other than themselves. And because they are pressured to do the work of placeholders for so much political, cultural, affective activity, they are everywhere and they’re very important. (119)

Cobb unpacks the cultural role of children: they are necessary not only to the temporal ordering, but also to the moral ordering of society; children are “officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (Bruhm and Hurley ix). As has been considered in critical conversations largely led by James Kincaid, people fixate on childhood sexuality and gender. For the national narrative, children must be asexually innocent (before coming into their adult heterosexuality) and in a clearly demarcated gender that fits into the heteronormative gender binary.

Children, however, are queer, in the sense of not being “normal” in their sexual or gender roles. Many children do not perform to strict gender outlines; therefore they are relegated to positions, such as tomboy or sissy, that seek to contain their queerness but still bear traces of homosexuality. While children are innocent, relaying their moral stance as America’s future, society deems crooked children morally corrupt with the potential to contaminate individually and collectively. For example, in Quentin’s section of The Sound and the Fury, he recounts his mother’s nagging of his father over Caddy. Because of her tomboyishness and her active sexuality, Caddy menaces those around her, or as Caroline Compson says, “she not only drags your [Jason, Sr.’s] name in the dirt but corrupts the very air your children breathe” (66). Caddy’s unladylike behavior—her promiscuity and her unfeminine physicality—not only sullies their family and the national heteronarrative it represents but also threatens to pollute other children around her, thus interrupting the “growing up” process and the reproduction of the establishment
through rhetoric and the bodies of future children. Queer children do not reproduce American normative narratives, and thus do not participate making and securing the American future.

*Childhood is in a crooked course or position.* Childhood, queerness, and disability are awry. Each stands outside of or astray from the expected or proper direction. In order to construct a “proper direction,” Americans define and pass judgment upon their fellow citizens’ identities in order to facilitate a normative, collective body. Therefore, it must be actively recognized that these conditions—queerness, disability, and childhood—are cultural encodings and that they can only be constructed in context because they rely upon social meaning and reproduction. In looking closely at these texts and the early twentieth-century context in which they were produced, I hope to expose the assumptions that support the seemingly natural norms of the period as well as the social anxieties fueling these norms. To identify this rhetorical discourse about childhood and crookedness, we must reread child characters in a way that does not simply pass off these norms as a sign of the times or as a part of childhood development. In texts children may be deemed aberrant by many sources—by the author, the narrator, the community of the novel, or even by the character herself—but each of these assessments usually traces back to and is inspired by a cultural understanding of what is “normal.”

The novels I am looking at are narrated by or narratively focalized through these crooked children. The authors create child voices, a technique that leads to identification and usually empathy. They show the (often negative) implications of this narrative on the children, which often include death, suicide, social ostracization, poor self-image, and mental illness. Whether or not the author intended this reading, by “reading crooked,” we can read around these traditional narratives and beyond any explanations such as “that’s the way things were” or “the kids will
grow out of it.” When these children are “removed” from the text, their impact lingers with the reader, begging for a crooked reading to revive them since the national narrative had no place for them. Even in texts that overtly reject crooked children in tone, language, or plot (or that simply adhere to normative narratives and thus have these children “fixed” or rejected from the text and society) we can reread them, read beyond their surfaces, and find meaning in the crooked children’s lives and depictions. I am departing from a traditional way of reading these texts and allowing us to think through how we, like the authors, construct children.

**The Conditions for Crookedness**

In order to “read crookedly,” readers need to consider the long, negative histories of childhood, queerness, and disability, which will allow insight into the positionality of the text and reader. The reader can actively ascertain how a text is positioning her and can consciously shift her perspective.

Many consider childhood to be a natural state, chronologically occurring before adulthood; in actuality, according to Patrizia Lombardo, it is an ideologically constructed, unstable “cultural object, and is culturally and historically determined, like everything else, even our body” (2). The concept of childhood as separate from adulthood developed in the eighteenth century, and though there are persistent attributes like innocence affiliated with childhood, the expression of these qualities is affected by historical moment and environment. In the twentieth century, called the “century of the child,” society designated children as worthy of attention and protection and thus policed children, ensuring that children knew their appropriate role as American citizens (West 2). Resulting from this cultural shift, a child studies movement
developed, and institutions concerned themselves with protecting and socializing children, leading to progressive institutional reforms that sought to assure social and physical growth (Macleod 24, 26).

In all aspects of life the American public reinforced a progress-centered narrative. In child spaces such as the home or classroom, through child culture with toys or clothing, and through shaping discursive conceptions such as sissies and tomboys, institutions clinically sought to understand and contain childhood. For example, at school children learned patriotic values alongside core academic subjects (West 40). Whiteness, wellness, and straightness were enforced through the strict mental, emotional, and physical discipline of gender and sexual development, and the emergent boy and girl cultures that swept the country at the turn of the twentieth century implemented these standards and affected the meanings attached to child bodies through the politics and socialization of gender (Grant 829). Leisure activities such as child specific literature or social activities both catered to and defined childhood. At school children learned patriotic values alongside core academic subjects (West 40). For example, the scouting movement developed as a means to manage and mold childhood. The Boy Scout pledge reads, “On my honor I will do my best, to do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the scout law, to help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight” (West 19). This simple pledge recited by thousands of American boys over decades speaks powerfully of the cultural narrative about childhood imparted to actual children. In these forty words that the movement expected (even young) boys to memorize as well as repeatedly and ritualistically perform the national narrative is outlined. America expects children to act on honor, and therefore a sense of ethics (defined and enforced communally). They are obliged to
act morally and legally right, which means that there is a “right” that is put forth by both God and one's country equally, making national virtues almost divinely sanctioned. To help people at all times, boys must have a strong, unflagging sense of accountability to their community and thus be invested in that community and its beliefs; thereby boys commit to American cultural standards. Finally normative traits are spelled out. For boys to be physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight, they must not be disabled, crooked, or queer. And in all these actions, these boys pledge that they “will.” This verb suggests a sense of normative development, that these boys are moving forward, looking toward theirs and America’s future where things will be better because the pledge’s tenets will be fulfilled; this future will be better because they will make it that way, emphasizing a certain kind of character being pledged and cultivated.

In the texts I examine, crooked children demonstrate their understanding of these norms, exemplified in the Boy Scout pledge, as well as an ultimate inability to adhere to them, seen in Quentin’s failed exhibitions of his masculinity through fights or Frankie’s attempts to feminize herself with excessive makeup and her flamboyant organdy dress. These children understand them because, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains, society relies upon the “discursive practice of marking what is deemed aberrant while concealing what is privileged behind an assertion of normalcy” (20). The nation discursively marks “otherness” on bodies in order to perpetuate its norms. In seeing crookedness or freakishness, the viewer may distance herself both physically and morally from this “otherness” and reassure herself of her normalcy. As we’ve repeatedly recognized through this project so far, though no children meet expectations, they have cultural models to which they should aspire. For example, take a straight, white, able-bodied young man whose voice is a bit higher than is deemed “normal” for men. Upon meeting
him, people suspect that he is queer, since the circulating public discourse on crookedness surrounding and informing people since childhood through the socializing methods I have discussed have instructed them to do so. Thus he constantly worries how this societal opinion and marking will affect him—his social position, his sense of self, and his future. Despite possessing the other normative masculine traits demanded of male children, he is crooked. His voice serves as a deviant physical trait, a social disability since it does not affect his bodily functioning, and the sinews of the social imaginary connect this physical trait to queerness. Since he diverges physically from the masculine, this threatens to extend to other parts of his identity. By social logic, to be masculine is to be heterosexual; therefore, if not externally meeting male standards, he must not be masculine and thus not straight. In this way “disability” contaminates the internal and moral as well, making him unwell or queer.

When first considering crookedness, I wondered if disability were queering, or if queerness disabled. However, it is not either/or; it is both/and. The cultural construction of disability possesses sexual stereotypes, and queerness contains ideas of physical incapacity. Queerness is perceived as disabling and disability as queering. They are expressed as mutually constitutive in cultural discourse.

To understand how children are marked as queer and disabled, we must be attuned to the historical and cultural production of these positions as they have discursively interacted. At the turn of the twentieth century, socioeconomic transformations affected the visibility of, and thus the public concern with, queerness. The rise of industrialization required urbanization, and the migration from the country to cities loosened familial ties. The back-to-back world wars intensified the destabilization of families and produced same-sex environments that offered
homoerotic spaces, inflaming social anxieties since the American dream founds itself on the heteronormative, nuclear family. The anonymity of urban life and the fluidity of culture in this period also allowed for the increased visibility of homosexuals (Fahy 72). Society ameliorated homosexual anxiety throughout this period by attempting to implement widespread regulation of sexuality and gender, as exhibited by Teddy Roosevelt’s decrying of overcivilization or the institution of youth movements such as the Boy and Girl Scouts.

Responding to cultural anxiety, public discourse writes on queers, emblematically marking their difference, corresponding to the modernist connection between “physical deformity and interior pathology” (Mitchell 359). In the early twentieth-century era of the medicine and psychology’s budding relationship and of Freudian influence, queerness was viewed as physical, mental, and/or moral underdevelopment or impairment. Though one may claim to be able to sense queerness through bodily comportment, it is not thought of as visibly apparent. In his theorization of homographesis, or the double process of “disciplinary inscription” and “resistant . . . de-scribing” of homosexual identity, Lee Edelman claims that “modern Western culture insists on both the psychic and visual determinacy of ‘homosexuality’” (Homographesis xv, 10). Discursively, sexual or gender deviance mars the body.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner symbolically depicts this interior and exterior “muddying” of queer people. Benjy’s recollections of his childhood with Caddy foreshadow her eventual erasure from her familial history and cultural memory because of her promiscuity. When young, Caddy exhibited physical signs of the rebelliousness and physical wildness that marked her as a queer child. When playing with her siblings, Caddy muddied her drawers, leading her brothers to react harshly to her queerness; Benjy cries and Quentin slaps her. At
bedtime, Dilsey washes Caddy: “She wadded the drawers and scrubbed Caddy behind with them. ‘It done soaked clean through onto you,’ she said” (48). Her physical action, her playing in the mud when she should not, cannot be washed away from her body; it leaves its mark, foreshadowing and symbolizing the way in which later society inscribes her queerness upon her body. When she eventually acts upon her sexuality, Caddy’s “transgressions” write themselves on her body; illustrating the visibility of her transgressive body, Benjy senses that she no longer smells like trees (31).a Her “naturalness” is lost.

Generally, queerness is understood as invisible and private (though often dragged, or “outed,” into the public sphere), and disability is thought of as (uncomfortably) visible and public. But such dichotomies are false: since the public constitutes what a normative body is and can do, disability is “the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules” (Thomson 6). While bodily difference does exist, deciding what qualifies as “able” implies a subjective determination. In The Sound and the Fury, Benjy Compson is developmentally challenged, and the very language at my disposal as a scholar to describe him is as slippery as the terminological history of people with mental retardation is pejorative. While numerous characters in his culture deride him and his abilities, seeking to reject him through castration and institutionalization, Faulkner grants Benjy narrative voice, the

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a In a surface reading, Caddy no longer smells like trees because she wears perfume. She participates in the beauty culture; therefore, an alternative reading of this passage would be that Benjy rejects her moves to grow up or adhere to normative femininity. However, I do not think this reading contradicts my assertions. While Caddy may try to perform proper femininity, as Frankie attempts in The Member of the Wedding, she fails since she expresses illicit sexuality; her powerful physicality, which the text implies is a cause for her promiscuity, marks her as aberrant, and this marking, this visible change, reveals itself in her muddy drawers and her smell.
first one readers encounter in the novel. This signifies a certain trust in or acknowledgment of his capability.

As with Benjy, society sought to identify and “fix” those with disabilities. In a capitalistic nation that ardently believes hard work begets success, and particularly in an era that called for industrial, patriotic contribution, the disabled community was viewed as un-American if not parasitic. Burgeoning medical and psychological initiatives, manifested in the eugenic, sterilization, and institutionalization movements, targeted disabled people and sought to prevent the reproduction of disabled people and what their bodies socially represented (Krumland 35). The public fears disabled sexuality because it doesn’t understand how impaired bodies perform sex; Mark Sherry explains this phenomenon, “Disabled people have been ‘queered’ through various cultural processes of enfreakment, particular to those that produce (often contradictory) notions of asexuality, vulnerability, inexhaustible sexual voraciousness, perversion, and exoticism” (781). Since impaired bodies often must experience sex in alternative ways, or because these bodies may not be capable of performing hetero-sanctioned sex, the cultural imaginary conceives of these differently-abled bodies as queer. The legal system also paralleled these goals of labeling and erasing disabled people by implementing legal strictures such as the ugly laws. As the 1881 Chicago ugly law stated, “Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of a fine of $1 [about $20 today] for each offense” (Schweik 2). These laws deemed those with non-normative bodies to be unworthy of publicly existing in America.
A historically specific demonstration of these institutional movements to control deviance is freak shows. Bearded women, hermaphrodites, dwarfs, the elephant man—these “freaks” represented extremes of non-normativity safely separated in their theatrical display, and yet they remained fearfully close because, as Leslie Fiedler explains, each freak “is 'one of us,' the human child of human parents” (24). By spectacularly presenting these “freaks” in shows, society sought to dehumanize them by ostracizing them and setting them forth as cautionary tales; however, despite creating boundaries between them and us (“freakish” vs. “normal”) the American public needs these freaks as sites for collective, normative identity building. In The Member of the Wedding, when trying to negotiate her identity and non-normativity, Frankie Addams describes that “she was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had all looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: We know you” (447). Frankie, not fully consciously, understands that because of her non-normativity (her tomboyishness, her discomfort with heterosexual encounters, her pubescent body) her community would group her with these “freaks” and thus cast her out; she unsurprisingly seeks to be a “member” throughout the novel in order to secure her place. As she explains, “I doubt they ever get married or go to a wedding, she said. Those Freaks” (477). She most wishes to be part of the national exemplar, the heterosexual coupling of her all-American, military brother and his fiancée.

Frankie understands that she must fit within America’s hegemonic normalcy, or else be the “other” against which this normalcy is founded. As a child, she must fulfill national expectations of childhood because American society constructs the figure of the child as a national symbolic object. National symbolic objects, as theorized by Lauren Berlant, are
spaces/objects (such as the Statue of Liberty) that serve as sites of national power and unity around which a national imaginary may form (103). The project of nation-building is always a project of the future; nations seek to maintain and, more importantly, to build upon their power and prestige for the future. The figure of the child, therefore, possesses a certain national potency, as the figure that holds the meaning and promise the nation seeks. As Lee Edelman considers in the influential *No Future*, in order to uphold the figure of the child, children must be reproduced so they can continue the transmission of national mores. Society relies upon heteronormativity. The child, then, is paradoxically the bearer and receiver of this American inheritance and legacy. To ensure this necessary social reproduction, however, the child must be straight and able-bodied in order to physically and metaphorically “grow up” and continue this process.

**The Interrogation of Crookedness**

I argue that the collective bodies of crooked children exist as objects onto which prejudices may be projected. In order to foster a cohesive national culture, citizens must rally behind something, and stereotypes, as well as national symbols, may cultivate a national imaginary. Stereotypes are standardized and socially constituted understandings of groups of people; dominant culture identifies child bodies that do not meet heteronormative expectations required for the national narrative and labels them as “other,” stereotyping them and marking them as sites for collective discrimination. I argue that children need not be as spectacularized as “freaks”; they may simply be regarded as “sissy,” “weak,” “strange,” “gay,” “off,” “dark,” “retarded,” or otherwise negatively stereotyped. The power of these prejudices, and the ability to
stand with a group against these “othered” bodies, nurtures a national intimacy. In fact Americans are currently confronting this national meaning-making system with the widespread dialogue concerning bullying and its violent repercussions (such as suicide, child on child violence, parent on child abuse, etc).

The continued relevance of this project, despite the years between these texts and the present, indicates that we must actively interrogate normalized national attitudes and to do so requires attunement to changes that occur in these cultural constructions over the course of history and to how historical transmission may affect these constructions. In order to re-read these crooked children’s narratives and re-consider them outside of the traditional coming-of-age stories that doom them, we must be able to understand the national rhetoric surrounding their bodies and the ways these authors are using that rhetoric in their narratives. Judith Butler’s scholarship makes explicit that only through repetitious, referential reproduction over time may discourse achieve the social goal it desires. Therefore in interrogating these propagated ideas and identifying their different, historical inflections we disrupt the rhythms of life normalized through this performativity, the “rituals and social processes which help constitute an identity” (Sherry 780).

By destabilizing the national heteronarrative, and re-considering these crooked children’s stories, we open up alternative readings; we acknowledge the subjecthood of these crooked children instead of relegating them to figures in a cautionary tale. The implications of these constructions, particularly in literature, greatly affect discourses of power, which rely upon social acceptance and circulation. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, “If we accept the convention that fiction has some mimetic relation to life, we grant it power to further shape our perceptions
of the world . . . ” (10). Literature does not simply mirror but also molds social life; these
crooked readings empower children, unlike the national narrative that preserves the Child, but in
doing so, excludes or alienates children. Susan Honeyman compares this imperative critical
attention to children with that to women in the past fifty years: “‘Womanhood’ has been an ideal
in the past and still is—the study of that idealization has been the means of many literary efforts
to dispel restrictive and impossible expectations put on women as a result. Likewise, childhood is
an abstraction created within discourse, an ideal which few young persons are likely to fit
perfectly if at all” (14). If we readers bend our perception by looking at how the two discourses,
the legitimized national narrative and the marginalized position of crooked children, interact
throughout time particularly within novels depicting them, we may revise the scripts available to
children.

The early twentieth century when queerness, childhood, and disability inflamed the
American imaginary offers a particularly fruitful space in which to “read crooked,” though this
methodology may be applied to American texts throughout history. For this project I will “read
crookedly” in five novels: Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Sherwood Anderson’s
*Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and Carson
McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). To
conclude this study I will extend my critical discussion to a contemporary example of a crooked
text, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the novel with which we began. Despite the
remarkable generic and narrative differences between and among these novels, they all focus on
crooked children and the normative American narrative. In doing so these novels explore similar
themes of temporal and spatial (dis)order, “freakish” (gendered and sexualized) bodies, and
denaturalized social perception.
Childhood is Tortuous: Temporal and Spatial (Dis)order

At the turn of the twentieth century a new perspective on childhood emerged in the United States, and childhood literally had a time and a place. Childhood had a chronological developmental element as well as a culturally sanctioned geography (of the home or school). Along with this national interest in childhood came the impulse to clarify the child (West 2-3). Society constructed and circulated a discourse concerning the child, and the fundamental aim of this discourse was to ensure America’s future. To do so, at the national and familial level the American public had to influence children for the good of the country. Therefore, America sought to rhetorically situate childhood as the site of American ideals. The national narrative dictated that children should be white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual, and in being so could fully uphold America’s mythology of itself as democratic, capitalistic, fertile, and strong.\(^b\) This national script was taught to children at all levels of personal and public life (West 2-3). Children needed to reproduce the order America sought to create, and social repetition ensures this order. As children developed and grew, so would the country.

In the texts I’m examining each of the authors considers this national imperative and its impact on their child characters. As I trace in these novels, these children react to the cultural expectations of childhood by recognizing them, internalizing and embracing them, fearing them, disappointedly succumbing to them, and/or attempting to construct a separate order for their lives.

By setting his novel in a geographically bounded (if imaginary) place and following the coming-of-age of George Willard, the predominant focalizing character, Sherwood Anderson

\(^b\) See Lee Edelman’s chapter “The Future is Kid Stuff” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.*
seemingly promotes a normalized, teleological view of history in *Winesburg, Ohio*. The small town setting and its stories feed into an American mythology of an ideal, quaint, conservative small town life, in which American familial and communal values perpetually exist; importantly, Anderson wrote this novel during World War I, a time during which “a relatively stable set of ‘dominant fictions’ of personal (and specifically gender) identity” were questioned (Whalan 38). In these stories, Anderson depicts the cultural understanding, continuation, and judgment of these American values. For example, in “Surrender” the narrator reveals regionally accepted heterosexual expressions, which mirror the national investment in growing up and straight. The narrator describes the Hardy sisters’ participation in social rituals to illustrates for readers how national values affected the temporal and spatial order of individuals:

The Hardy sisters, Mary and Harriet, were both older than Louise. In a certain kind of knowledge of the world they were years older. *They lived as all of the young women of Middle Western towns lived.* In those days . . . a girl was “nice” or she was “not nice.” If a nice girl, she had a young man who came to her house to see her on Sunday and on Wednesday evenings. Sometimes she went with her young man to a dance or a church social. At other times she received him at the house and was given the use of the parlor for that purpose . . . After a year or two, if the impulse within them became strong and insistent enough, they married. (46-7, emphasis mine)

For Mary and Harriet, their (coming-of-) age depends on not only biological development but also social maturity. Mary and Harriet comprehend and accept this script for their lives, and they perform steps, by “liv[ing] as all the young women of Middle Western towns lived,” to progress
into American adulthood.

In the focalization through George Willard and his “formative years,” Anderson considers the scripts available to children, particularly through George’s interactions with Winesburg’s residents. Readers learn many of the residents’ stories because they recount them to George, seeking affirmation. As the town reporter, he literally reproduces the citizen’s stories for public consumption and repetition, circulating the town’s narratives about and for itself. For example, Elmer Crowley seeks out George Willard to reverse what he perceives to be the community’s deeming of his family and himself as “queer”; Elmer thinks, “George Willard, he felt, belonged to the town, typified the town, represented in his person the spirit of the town . . . Did he not represent public opinion?” (107-8). To some extent Elmer’s statement is true in that George as child represents the hopes of this small American town. In fact, Elmer feels that if he cannot get George’s approval, then “he could see no hope of a future for himself,” since culturally the child is the means by which we access the future (110).

However no child can live up to the normative American standard. George is an excellent example in that he is healthy, white, middle-class, and heterosexual, which should give him the credentials to be the ideal American child, but he bends in his straight position. George serves as a vessel filled with this town’s and America’s dreams. As residents recount their lives to George, they seek not only to gain legitimation from him, the placeholder for America, but also to impart their social experiences and thus indoctrinate him (the child, the future) with the American narrative. George himself acts out these expectations, almost unconsciously. One evening he imagines himself as grown up in different male roles he could fill; at one point he acts like a soldier, a particularly respected American role. When playing this role and inspecting his fellow,
imaginary soldiers, he finds himself hypnotized in his play, stating, “In every little thing there must be order, in the place where men work, in their clothes, in their thoughts. I myself must be orderly”; the narrator states that “he had never before thought such thoughts as had just come into his head and he wondered where they had come from” and that “it seemed to him that some voice outside of himself had been talking as he walked” (101). George bemusedly hints at the beginnings of his awareness of the expectations placed on him as a member to “be orderly.” He should be the last person in the world to hear the dominant script as separate from himself because he fits it so well. It is to those people that the norm is invisible because it is so normalized. One must recognize, as George vaguely does, that social order and the narrative promoting it are not natural; they are instituted through “laws” and social scripts disseminated to the point where one does not recognize them as constructions and instead simply accepts them as everyday facts without consideration (“where they had come from”).

Anderson invites a crooked reading of this scene with George’s half-formed comprehensions of his environment’s influence on his identity. He criticizes America’s self-making through actual bodies here and throughout his stories. But at the end of his play-acting, George whispers to himself that “it is better to be alone . . . they [the boys] wouldn’t understand what I’ve been thinking down here” (101). By having George internalize these explorations of scripts available to him as an American male and acknowledge that such thoughts were strange (“they wouldn’t understand”), Anderson seems to depict that the normative script is so naturalized that people cannot (or are too afraid to) imagine a positionality that can acknowledge not only that there is an artificial dominant script but also that there are alternative possibilities. However, I do not think Anderson goes as far as my crooked reading. Some criticism on
*Winesburg, Ohio* has advanced the argument that Anderson’s text serves to advance the normative narrative, and have considered this text masculinist, conservative, or patriarchal. John Crowley, for example, states that Anderson identifies himself with many crooked people in the text, but then “shifts to a generalized awareness” of isolation in the modern world and that he exhibits traditional “sexist and homophobic” views “however sympathetic he may have felt toward women and homosexuals” (14). Crowley acknowledges Anderson’s complex, paradoxical views in the text. At one moment George Willard is a sweet, pure boy, and in a later story, he beds a young woman and misogynistically claims, “She hasn’t got anything on me” (29). I think Anderson’s narrative posits a moral responsibility to present all sides of life equally, which opens up the text to crooked readings.

Anderson opens his novel with this need to recognize all aspects of life through the introduction “The Book of the Grotesque,” an early title for the work. This title signals both the theme of the novel, to look at all types and extremes of people that may be deemed grotesque by others but deserve representation, and calls upon a tradition of the grotesque. The southern grotesque implies exaggeration and excess, and the means by which the modern world “turn[s] trusting, aspiring, decent people into ‘grotesques’” (Boyd 322). However, to consider the crooked children in this novel as “grotesques” is reductive, since freakish abnormality in this genre serves a symbolic or metaphoric role rather than representing the reality these crooked children face in their literal, bodily expressions of queerness, disability, and childhood. Nonetheless, Anderson’s work may be read crookedly as it considers the differences inherent in the national hegemony. In “The Book of the Grotesque” the “writer,” the “old man” depicted in the introduction (who could arguably be the writer of the novel, as the novel may be the book of
grotesques he is writing in the vignette), describes the young thing inside of him that prevented
him from becoming a grotesque (and from publishing the novel). His explanation makes use of
the circulating images and language of reproductive futurism:

   Perfectly still he lay and his body was old and not of much use any more, but
   something inside him was altogether young. He was like a pregnant woman, only
   that the thing inside him was not a baby but a youth. No, it wasn’t a youth, it was
   a woman, young, and wearing a coat made of mail like a knight. It is absurd, you
   see, to try to tell what was inside the old writer as he lay on his high bed and
   listened to the fluttering of his heart. The thing to get at is what the writer, or the
   young thing within the writer, was thinking about. (5)

The original feeling inside the writer, which keeps him alive and provides meaning to his life,
makes him feel like a pregnant woman, and this feeling situates him within the national
narrative. By participating in the reproduction of the social narrative, he acts or feels like a
pregnant woman, metaphorically living the national rhythms of (re)production. However, he
immediately corrects himself, rejecting the role of the physical body in possessing and seeking to
“birth” national reproductive futurism and developmental logic. Rather, the thing inside of him is
a youth, clarified as a young woman dressed in chainmail. This queer image of a tomboyish
female child, within the writer’s wrecked (disabled) old body, represents the potentiality for
meaning in crooked childhood; it makes him “more alive . . . than at any other time” (5).

While this scene illustrates Anderson’s interrogation of the dominant narrative through his
own “book of the grotesque,” my crooked reading locates those whom the dominant narrative
uses to construct itself, crooked children. Consider Elmer Crowley as a crooked child who
internalizes the dominant narrative that he believes excludes him and therefore assumes he must be written into the heteronarrative in order to gain (social) subjectivity. He wants to travel to a large city and try to “grow up” or “straighten out”: “He would steal a ride on the local and when he got to Cleveland would lose himself in the crowds there. He would get work in some shop and become friends with the other workmen. Gradually he would become like other men and would be indistinguishable. He would no longer be queer and would make friends. Life would begin to have warmth and meaning for him as it had for others” (111). Elmer seeks to fulfill his capitalistic, teleological role and “straighten out” in order to lose the conspicuous nature of crookedness.

When *Winesburg, Ohio* concludes, Anderson leaves the readers with the image of George Willard literally moving on. In closing the novel with George on a train leaving his town, Anderson calls upon the national myth of mobility, a traditional, American, masculine narrative, which implies that George leaves his childhood behind in Winesburg: “His life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood” (138). However readers never discover if George figuratively moves on, and if through leaving Winesburg he necessarily progresses. Since Anderson exposes, but does not privilege, life possibilities, we cannot know if he moving forward, or sideways.

However, asking whether George adheres to societal expectations in his coming of age shows that children may (and regularly do) internalize these imposed cultural narratives, as Pecola Breedlove does in *The Bluest Eye*. When read crookedly, Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* can be read as an exploration of the impact of this normative narrative on both children and culture. In fact the very nature of James’s novella indicates a temporal and spatial disruption, an
aspect of crookedness. While in *The Turn of the Screw* the Governess narrates the story of her experience with her charges, Flora and Miles, in first person, she is not directly telling her tale to us, her readers. Instead an unnamed narrator recounts the verbal recitation by Douglas of the Governess’s penned account, though this memoir may itself be a fiction (Hansen 371). Whether or not a “true” story, James’s framing of the ghost story situates the Governess’s story outside of its original time and space. In having her horrifying tale told at a lively house party among calls for ghost stories, dominant society, represented by the party, lessens the impact and meaning of her tale, suggesting the way in which narratives become part of (and often obscured or changed by) the national imaginary through retelling. While the novella ends without returning to the framing story, readers may assume that after hearing the story, the houseguests shudder and move on without really considering the meaning within the tale. Reading crooked appeals to readers not to move on like these houseguests and instead to look beyond the genre (the ghost story for the guests and the coming-of-age story for the crooked readers) and consider the attitudes towards and treatment of crooked children within the novel.

As with the framing of the ghost story, James teases readerly expectations with his title. The action of turning a screw implies a normative temporality. To turn a screw, one may only follow a set direction, and the “turn of the screw” suggests an impending action that produces progress (whether tightening or loosening the screw with the turn). This title also suggests a future; at some point, there will be a turn of the screw. This future is foreboding: a turn of the screw is an action that makes a bad situation worse and may force someone to do something. Therefore, what is the bad situation in the novel, and how is it made worse? The title proposes a sort of ultimate or final action; it is not “a” turn of the screw, it is “the” turn of the screw. In a surface
reading, the bad situation foreshadowed by the title may be the haunting of the children by the ghosts, and the action that worsens it is their eventual possession leading to Miles’s death. Though he dies, in this reading Miles, the child, was always innocent and suffered through queer influence; his death “saved” him. This reading suggests the dangers of disordereding forces like disability or queerness, thereby inspiring more fervent societal defenses against crookedness and its pervasive influence, because in this ending for Miles, to some extent for the ill Flora, and for the society they represent as children, there is no future.

However, *The Turn of the Screw* easily reads as a crooked text. Miles and Flora express subjectivities not permitted to children by the cultural narrative. Instead of being innocent in both knowledge and sexuality, they appear to know and desire things they should not, and they appear content with their crooked lives, until the Governess appears. The Governess mediates the story. She is the first person narrator and the figure of authority, seemingly standing in for the American culture and its ideals. She ensures order and seeks to preserve the children and their childhoods. Though her first person status logically implies that readers should identify with her and her views, James constructs her as an unreliable narrator and an ironic figure who regularly indulges in paranoid thoughts and participates in hysterically exaggerated dialogues over the state of the children.

By denying any conclusive answer as to whether the ghosts are real or not, James generates ambiguity, allowing for what Ellis Hansen argues, which is that James “clearly permits a subversive reading in which the only real threat in *The Turn of the Screw* is a moral panic” (373). The danger of the text, from the point of view of the Governess, is the queer (in class and sexuality) relationships between the children and the former valet, Peter Quint, and the
governess, Miss Jessel; this threat manifests itself in traits such as Miles’s influence on his classmates that leads to his expulsion from school or the children’s precociousness, and the danger is sinister in that it continues after these adults’ deaths through their believed haunting of the children. Her virulent response to what crookedness she imagines around and in the children as well as her adherence to the dominant heteronarrative leads to her oppression of the children; so arguably the only literal threat to the children in the text is the moral panic incited in the Governess and the actions this anxiety inspires. The death of Miles, the illness of Flora, and the madness of the Governess all occur because of the perceived strangeness and mischief of the children and the Governess’s overwhelming loyalty to narratives about normative childhood.

Since she is just moving beyond her youth and entering society, the Governess feels pressure as a member to rigorously follow and implement its tenets and thus ensure group formation. When the ghost story begins with the Governess receiving her position, we may infer from the text that she is probably in her early twenties, and Douglas describes her as “young, untried, and nervous” (5). When meeting Miles and Flora, the Governess unsurprisingly idealizes the children because she holds dominant cultural opinions on children; she romantically describes them as beautiful and pure (13). She views her role as governess to protect them and their white, whole, straight, privileged status, at least until their necessary passage into heteronormative adulthood and its necessary knowledge: “They gave me so little trouble—they were of a gentleness so extraordinary. I used to speculate—but even this with a dim disconnectedness—as to how the rough future (for all futures are rough!) would handle them and bruise them” (14). She must guard their innocence from the negative, penetrating influences of the world, implying that they
are naturally straight and able but can be bent by socially contaminating forces like queerness and disability.

However, Miles’s ejection from his school (his “correct” temporal-spatial place) begins the Governess’s inquisition into Miles’s “badness” and its external cause (since children are understood to be naturally good and pure), leading to her discovery, or invention, of the queer ghosts. Convinced that Quint sexually infected Miles during their inappropriate time spent together, the Governess draws the children nearer and nearer to her, striving to protect their natural, normative status as children (which includes helplessness, gentleness, and partial subjectivity): “I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most loveable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep constant ache of one’s own engaged affection. We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me, and I—well, I had them” (27). The Governess, not the ghosts she believes haunt the children, possesses them (“I had them”).

Similarly, in order to secure its future, America obsesses over the figure of the child through the bodies of children who must grow up straight in order to participate in the literal (re)productivity of the nation and who must pass on the national narrative; all the while Americans conjure specters of crookedness (queerness, disability) to haunt the figure of the child, thereby creating an “other” or threat, like Quint and Miss Jessel in relation to Miles and Flora.

In striving to protect the children the Governess treats them “unnaturally.” She does not allow Miles to return to school, his “correct space,” and does not raise them in accordance with cultural norms; Miles calls her rearing of them “this queer business” (60). By constantly trying to catch them in collusion with the ghosts or with excessive, damaging knowledge, she exposes
them to queerness by bringing them physically close to that from which she claims to be protecting them from; she mirrors the move to insist upon the innocence of (and thus the potentiality of polluting) children and thereby sexualize them. As James Kincaid explains, "We have made the child we are protecting from sexual horrors into a being defined exclusively by sexual images and terms: the child is defined as the sexual lure, the one in danger, the one capable of attracting nothing but sexual thoughts" (282-83). Miles’s school expels him for an unnamed reason though Miles claims it’s because he “said things” but only to those he “liked” and that they must have repeated it to those “THEY liked” (84). This transmission of (probably sexual or queer) knowledge among a population that should not possess its own knowledge, especially concerning non-normative sexuality, is unacceptable since children should only conform to and passively represent societal knowledge and meaning, but readers must remember that the Governess imagines and imparts this sexuality to Miles based on conjecture. Flora, when accused by the Governess of communing with her dead Miss Jessel, and thus expressing herself outside of the normative order, Flora, seen (and affected) by the eyes of the Governess, reacts to her accusation and the knowledge thrust on her in this claim:

Flora continued to fix me with her small mask of disaffection, and even at that minute, I prayed God to forgive me for seeming to see that, as she stood there holding tight to our friend’s dress, her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished. I’ve said it already—she was literally, she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly. “I don’t know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never have. I think you’re cruel. I don’t like
you!” Then, after this deliverance, which might have been that of a vulgarly pert little girl in the street . . . (70)

The Governess’s enforcement of normative childhood on her, through exposing her to knowledge about her dead governess and accusing her of “evil” actions, scares Flora. While the Governess perceives of her face as losing its “childish beauty” and turning crooked (or hard, ugly, and old), Flora, terrified by the Governess’s expression of the normative narrative through persecution, falls terribly ill and verbally assaults the Governess in language young women should not know (66, 74). However, that Flora has shown no “inappropriate” behavior before this final tirade from the Governess suggests that her illness and actions, like Pecola’s madness, are brought on by the imposition of the heteronarrative, and I think James intends for the reader to see this.

In seeking to reinstate the proper order of life and childhood at Bly, the Governess presses Miles to confess his transgressions, or crookedness, and be straightened out through societal forgiveness (84). As Miles shies away from her and her questions, the Governess, who calls herself “his judge, his executioner,” springs upon him, and at that moment he dies (84, emphasis mine). The final line in her account reads, “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (85). Conservative readings can point out the “dispossession” of his heart as textual proof that Quint really did hold ghostly sway over the child so Miles has been rescued from queerness even if he may only be so through his death. While in this reading the Governess saves Miles, the Child, in a crooked reading the Governess saves society from Miles, the crooked child. I argue that Governess’s assertion of her role as executioner leads to the conclusion that the Governess, as figure for society, removes Miles from the social order by
killing him, so he can not further infect other children or society with his crookedness as he did at his boarding school; order may again be stabilized.

With the circulating cultural narrative about childhood and the repercussions for crooked children, unsurprisingly some children fear their societal labeling as “other.” In Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie Addams confronts her “strangeness” and tries to dispel her fear by becoming a member . . . of something: “It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid” (461). The course of the novel follows Frankie through the summer when Frankie confronts her “coming of age.” Since she fits into no social group, her “development” is stalled; therefore, the summer lasts as a “long queer season” (466). Time seems to pause for her as she grows sideways and into delay. Though she does grow up, she is physically too big and therefore spatially out of order, or too big for her chronological or developmental time. She does not metaphorically or physically fit the national ideals of childhood.

While the outside world faces destabilization with World War II, Frankie does not fear for her nation. Instead, she wishes she could participate in the war through transforming into a boy so she could be a Marine or donating her blood, which she cannot do because she is too young:

She wanted to donate a quart a week and her blood would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese, all over the whole world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people. She could hear the
army doctors saying that the blood of Frankie Addams was the reddest and the strongest blood that they had ever known. And she could picture ahead, in the years after the war, meeting the soldiers who had her blood, and they would say that they owed their life to her; and they would not call her Frankie—they would call her Addams. (480)

Frankie imagines herself literally binding together all people and providing their futures through her physical blood. She would ensure the continuation of the social order with a sacrifice of her (child) body (though her wish to connect all people, in a time of American isolationism, may suggest a hint of her unAmerican crookedness or queerness). However, she may not play a part, and therefore she feels separated from other people.

All the while, Frankie does not inhabit the microcosm of American unity, the nuclear family; her mother died when giving birth to her, her father ignores her, and her brother seems indifferent toward her. Instead she has what Thomas Fahy deems an “anti-American family” (76). Her substitute family is Berenice, her disabled black maid, and John Henry, her queer, sickly younger cousin. They spend untraceable days in the kitchen together, where John Henry, and at times Frankie, cover the walls with “queer, child drawings” disordering a traditional, safe, domestic space (463). Frankie recounts how John Henry would construct a separate order or sense of life, as he does with his drawings, through biscuit men: “When Berenice gave him some raisins, he did not stick them all around as any other human child would do . . . When Berenice brought the biscuit man from the oven, they saw that it looked exactly like any biscuit man ever made by a child—it had swelled so that all the work of John Henry had been cooked out” (467). John Henry strives to live the world his crooked way, much as he makes his individualized
biscuit men; however, when baked (or brought to fruition by an outside, shaping force, like society), his biscuit men become like all other children’s men. His crookedness gets baked out, suggesting the normalizing narrative of coming-of-age.

In the same way, Frankie strives to straighten herself out through a normalizing narrative, her brother’s wedding. She identifies her brother and his fiancée as an ideal, heterosexual, white, whole group, and she wishes to become a part of it. As Berenice describes the couple and their union, “Why, they looked natural” (485). This means of growing up or becoming part of society is naturalized and not only the expected, but also the “right” path. Berenice, despite her “othered” status as a black, disabled female, verbalizes cultural standards (because she wants to save Frankie, realizing that if one does not adhere to this narrative, one must be removed through death or expulsion). When Frankie asks her if marriage stops growth, she claims “It certainy do,” though she warns Frankie not to try to join her brother’s wedding, as this is a very queer expression of her wish to be normal. Nonetheless, Frankie resolves to join the wedding, seeing it as an opportunity to become a member:

A thought and explanation suddenly came to her, so that she knew and almost said aloud: *They are the we of me.* Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an *I* person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a *we* to claim, all others except her . . . But the old Frankie had had no *we* to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer of *we* of her and John Henry and Berenice—and that was the last *we* in the world she wanted. Now all this was suddenly over with and changed. There was her brother and his bride, and it was as though when first she saw them something she had
known inside of her: They are the we of me. And that was why it made her feel so queer, for them to be away in Winter Hill while she was left all by herself. (497)

Frankie wants to become part of the normative, hetero, nationally sanctioned “we” (as opposed to the “terrible” we of her anti-American substitute family) and begins to temporally order her life around this impending event. However, her means by which to do so reflects her queerness. She seeks to join her brother’s heterosexual relationship, thus necessarily making it “crooked” by her very presence. Frankie strives to straighten herself out by feminizing her name to F. Jasmine, wearing dresses, entering adult spaces (the Blue Moon bar), and finding herself a “beau” (533). F. Jasmine relishes her perceived new “connection” with her local and national community and struts around town with a sense of “lightness, power, and entitlement” (508). She basks in her imagined privilege through joining normative society, but her need to publically expose her new “normalness” reveals her discomfort with this exhibition of conformity.

Despite her wholehearted performance, Frankie still feels unease in her position and more than once threatens to kill herself (to remove herself from the social order before it can take that step itself) if she cannot become a member through the wedding (530). Speaking for the “crooked,” Berenice acknowledges their marginalization as well as their inability to do anything about it, even Frankie with her frantic actions:

“We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don’t know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself. Is that what you was trying to say?”
“I don’t know,” F. Jasmine said. “But I don’t want to be caught.”

“Me neither,” said Berenice. “Don’t none of us. I’m caught worse than you is.”

(567)

Berenice describes their condition as “caught,” identifying their social entrapment. Society forces these non-conforming bodies into abject positions in order to construct its normative order. To be caught is also to be trapped, unable to move. Without mobility there is no potential for development of any sort. America needs crooked children like John Henry and Frankie, even Berenice as her race and disability situate her within the dominant definition of childhood as dependent or undeveloped, to be temporally and spatially “caught.” Crooked children do not receive a place or time in society. They have no access to social mobility or socially legitimated growth: they are “caught” outside, since they are not allowed within, this narrative.

The marriage at the end of the novel marks the end of Frankie’s construction of anti-family. John Henry, the most crooked of the three, dies a graphic death of meningitis; he symbolically passes away, after screaming for three days, the same day the fair with its freaks leaves town, almost as if he must be ejected from the town when they are, at the close of the queer season. Berenice decides she “might as well marry T. T.” since the Addams move and no longer need her; without her liminal space, her crooked family, she must enter into a more traditional, acceptable social position in a lawfully acknowledged heterosexual relationship (604). Many critics argue that Frankie “grows up” and out of her disabled, queer childhood. Michelle Ann Abate claims, “After being a tomboyish freak with a queer sexual identity and a strong identificatory link with nonwhite peoples, Frankie experiences an abrupt shift to behaviors that are stereotypically feminine, clearly heteronormative, and unmistakably rooted in whiteness”
I assert that a crooked reading moves beyond this surface reading of the cultural narrative’s burden on Frankie, now Frances. She seemingly succumbs to the narrative and becomes a normative child growing into a straight, white, able-bodied, responsible adult. She befriends Mary Littlejohn, an almost hyperbolic figure of the ideal child, whom Berenice dismissively calls “marshmallow-white.” Together they partake in “appropriate” behaviors and do not visit the freak pavilion at the fair, which Mary Littlejohn’s mother, as authority figure, recognizes to be dangerous (604). However, Frances exposes her chronic crookedness. She fawns over Mary Littlejohn, in love with her normalcy in the same way she obsessed over her brother’s wedding. She queerly desires Mary and what Mary represents, thereby revealing her persisting crookedness and her askew desires, placing her outside of social norms. The novel ends with the chiming of a bell, an indication of temporal order, and Frances’s “instant shock of happiness,” indicating her pleasure in being accepted inside the order while still remaining a somewhat liminal figure (607).

Through reading crooked, Frances offers an example of the potentiality of entering the social order and still remaining crooked, though most texts do not offer this liminal space; instead many crooked children face the repercussions of the traditional coming-of-age narrative. Another work by Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, depicts the disappointment of recognizing and succumbing to societal expectations, and thus losing the freedom found in crookedness. Her multiple focalizing characters wander about trying to find a place within life for themselves, each one outside normative order because of race, class, sexuality, and/or disability and seeking to define their lives by an individual, meaningful order. The African American Dr. Copeland understands society’s obsession with normative childhood and interprets
it in a racialized way as a means to help his “othered” culture; he internalizes the narrative but
adjusts it to his own people. He explains the chrononormativity of the life they live in: “In the
quietness the clock on top of the cupboard sounded very loud, and because of what they had just
said to each other the monotonous ticking was like the word ‘chil-dren, chil-dren,’ said over and
over” (64). He recognizes the dominant organization of life around childhood and the
reproductive narrative.

If Mister Singer serves as the center around which the novel rotates, arguably Mick
Kelly, the tomboyish, rebellious crooked child, is its protagonist. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*
may be read as her coming of age, as she navigates her rocky journey from adolescence to
adulthood, and the conclusion of the novel, her choosing to grow up and work to help support
her socioeconomically challenged family, can be read as her successful and selfless entry into
society. However, a crooked reading of Mick reveals the disheartening impact of normalizing
order on her.

In the novel Mick, like Frankie, recognizes her outsider status, especially in school where
she should “belong” at this point in her life (89). She too tries to situate herself within this
narrative, which requires her falling into line. She hosts a prom party, a popular, gender-
enforcing event of the time, at her home so as to fit in with her peers. For this initiation into the
American public, Mick transforms herself into a “proper” woman, straightening out (physically
and sexually) her childish, gangling tomboyishness: “When she finished she lifted up her chin
and half-closed her eyes like a movie star. Slowly she turned her face from one side to the other.
It was beautiful she looked—just beautiful. *She didn’t feel like herself at all. She was somebody
different from Mick Kelly entirely*” (91, emphasis mine). Mick feels self-worth when she is not
like herself at all. One should not dismiss her statement as a sign that she is happy to be coming into herself as a woman. Rather she must be a different person in order to be beautiful or worthwhile, displaying the traditional narrative’s damaging impact on crooked children.

At the party, which progresses awkwardly, younger neighborhood kids infiltrate and the night erupts into madness and play: “Freshmen in Vocational all dressed up for a real prom party and acting just like kids. It was half playlike and half not playlike at all . . . The kids had caused it. They were like a catching sickness, and their coming to the party made all the other people forget about High School and being almost grown” (99). The children remind the adolescents of the responsibilities they are about to bear as members of the reproductive order. The children’s bodies, the representation of the order, act as a “catching sickness,” infecting all of them with fear and anxiety that break out in an extreme expression of uncontrollable play, “half playlike and half not playlike at all.” The long, dark night of the play separates them all from normative temporal and spatial order. The children both stand for social order and express subversion of that order since actual children never quite adhere completely to socially imposed expectations.

Mick ends the evening with a stark revelation: she now knows that this grown-up world she wanted to enter and these budding adults she looked up to and desired to be accepted by are just like her. They have no special knowledge or meaning. Instead they simply live by and through chrononormativity, and that is all there is to life; she realizes “she would feel different in the halls now, knowing that they were not something special but like any other kids . . . It was all over. It was the end” (99). The outfit she had worn to mark her entrance into spectacular adulthood is now torn and ragged, but she cannot put her previous tomboy clothes on either (100). Each of these extremes of dress illustrates her excesses, her desires, but she may no longer
attain these extremes. With some resistance, she begins to accept her position now, and even experiences a heterosexual exploit with a fellow outsider, Harry. But these normative actions disorder the sense of who she is, and literally break her apart, as she describes her feelings during sex as her head breaking off from her body. Though she claims she never wants children, and thus does not plan to participate in the reproductive order, Mick acknowledges that “this is how it was,” and wearily tolerates the recognition that “she was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not” (235, 237).

She had created a separate order with which to deal with her social exclusion, but once these “growing up” events have occurred, she is banished from this personal order. She had organized her external world and its pressures into an outside room, and her private feelings and crookedness, mainly expressed through her love of music, in her internal room (139). When earlier in the novel Mick tries to build a violin, she strives to implement her internal world in the external. She wants to be able to express herself in her own nonconforming way in the American public sphere. But her violin does not work or produce music, representing her symbolic failure in integrating her crookedness into dominant society (40). Later, after her coming of age, she may not enter her internal room at all. Overwhelmed by her environment’s molding of her, she strives to keep herself occupied since she cannot turn to her sense of order for comfort, and when she stops to think about her position, a “terrible afraidness came into her” (262). However while Mick cannot enter her room or hold any tunes in her mind, she imagines saving money for a personal piano, and fears if she cannot make the payments it will be taken away from her. Her musings on a personal piano serve as a strong metaphor for her ability to “pass” or its ability to take this personal, crooked part away from herself. But Mick claims that if this event ever
occurs, she will do whatever it takes to keep the piano such as hide it or fight for it. Her section of the novel ends with her clinging to hope for her future in her strict environment:

But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too.

It was some good.

All right!

O.K.!

Some good. (302, my emphasis)

While Biff Brannon and external sources sense and admit that she has grown into a lovely, responsible young women, internally Mick clings to her tomboyish, noncompliant childhood. We can read her actions as fitting in, but her thoughts hint at her resistance. Her mental repetition of “it was too” suggests the repetition needed to institute and stabilize a narrative, and in her case, she seems to be holding on to her excess, her “too.” Yet her language, her “but”s, “maybe”s, and eventual over-reassurance of “All right! O.K.! Some good” implies her fear that her order will not hold or be enough. Both McCullers and I question if a crooked order can stand alongside, against, or even subversively within the dominant order?

In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson children create individual orders as a means by which to live. The American narrative relies upon historical transmission and reproduction, and it must forcefully insist upon its norms in order to maintain its stability. However, the South has its own particular version of this narrative that I argue may be
understood as an amplified version, often considered grotesque or distorted. Properness is aggressively enforced. The South obsesses over ideals concerning wholeness, straightness, whiteness, ableness, and genderness, and it dwells on and guards its history in order to reproduce it. Thus crookedness regularly appears in Southern literature, as it is a great source of social anxiety and contention. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner considers what happens when childhood “fails” and the reproductive social order halts. He does this to critique the oppressive and deteriorating “normative” Southern order. His characters reveal the artificial nature of “correct” or proper ways of being through their challenges within it.

With Caddy, readers mostly face her absence and only interact with her through the historical narrative of the other characters. Owing to rejection by her family, she does not appear in the narrative present of life or of the novel. We only experience “delay, avoidance, evasion” in regards to Caddy. She is trapped in the past of memories or in the future when we readers could potentially meet her (Minter 357). She is temporally out of sorts, as well as spatially, since she is never anywhere in the present to readers or other characters. Through Quentin’s memories, we do see how the national narrative arguably ruins her life by straightening it out. She behaves inappropriately for a female child with her over-physicality and sexual activity. When she becomes pregnant her family seeks to socially integrate her by situating her in a (unhappy) marriage. Depressed with this option, which is the only one available to her if she wants to remain in her community and be with the people she loves, she considers allowing Quentin to kill her then commit suicide, thus rejecting society’s oppression through limiting her options by claiming her own. At this point, having transgressed American norms by getting pregnant, Caddy becomes disjointed from time. Talking about her illicit feelings for Dalton Ames to Quentin, she
claims, “I would die for him I’ve already died for him I die for him over and over again” (95). Her desires situate her outside of her era and its permitted desires. Since society eventually expels her altogether, she has no choice but to create her own society. Faulkner does not allow us to see her new life because we as part of heteronormative society are at fault for her rejection that necessitates this new life.

Benjy and Quentin, to whom Faulkner grants narrative agency, intimately describe their own means by which to maintain order. The narrative issues of Benjy’s section are caused by his (dis)ability. Everything is always present at once in his mind, and readers must negotiate this spatial and temporal disorder. Readers literally experience his sense of order as we follow his thoughts and memories through space and time; we, like Benjy, do not possess stability, revealing how lives may be led without or outside of the dominant order. Benjy relies upon certain personally created rituals such as his strictly mapped horse rides or his graveyard. This private order may even be perceived as dangerous by his community because it appears arbitrary and does not adhere to normal behavior. Though Benjy does not impose it on anyone else, it is seen as indulgence that could undermine the larger order.

Unlike Benjy, who cannot understand the social order, Quentin gets it and becomes unhealthily obsessed with it. Quentin does not “fit in” because of his depression and anxiety, which literally cause his to have an “altered conception” or reality, as well as his inability to conform to masculinity (Reuning 61). In America, according to Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, “a well-regulated self . . . contributes to a well-regulated nation” (42). Quentin may not regulate himself in the way society needs him to. Because his crooked body and its expressions bar him from the dominant order, Quentin fixates on time and its reminder of his position outside
national order, particularly by counting the minutes until his death when time will no longer aggrieve him. Therefore, he attaches to the most blatant expression of the normative order, time, as it manifests itself in clocks. His entire story is told over the day he dies and takes place around the community in which he attends college. Despite the seemingly situated nature of his story, his narration disturbs this order. To begin his final day, he breaks his pocket watch, refusing for one day not to be oppressed by normativity. However, the clock keeps ticking, revealing how he can never truly escape this order. Not only does it continue ticking, but also its broken glass cuts his finger, literally exposing time’s violence. As he continues his day, we listen in on the convoluted thoughts that reveal his breaking up of normal history and space in his mind.

I argue that for Quentin, clocks represent the dominant order and its “fixing” of crooked children. Going into a clock shop, Quentin refuses to look at the faces of any of the watches, but instead asks if any of the clocks have the right time. The watchmaker tells him, “No. But they haven’t been regulated and set yet” (54). These numerous different clocks tick on outside of the “correct” time. However, they will not be allowed to continue to do so. They will be “regulated.” In the same way, crooked children express an alternative order and way of living, or “ticking,” and must be fixed so that they reflect what is “correct.” Quentin cannot face this potential future of regulation, or possibility that he may not even be able to be fixed. This explains his “dis-ease with the immediate, which becomes a desire to escape time itself” because the immediate, the present, necessarily moves him closer to one of these inevitable futures (Minter 350). Shortly before his death he starts to separate himself from this order, both acknowledging and rejecting time’s hold over him: “A quarter hour yet. And then I’d not be. The peacefullest words.
Peacefullest words . . . I was. I am not” (110). Quentin violently separates himself from the normative order through his death, taking himself out of space and time.

Each of these children must confront the social order that labels them as crooked. Whatever steps they take—acknowledgment of, adherence to, fear of, rejection of, or separation from this order—they inevitably seem to be subsumed by or rejected from the national narrative. Is this what is necessary to “come of age” in America? Can readers simply dismiss these children, especially after these novelists have privileged their crookedness with novelistic attention? How might our interactions with these children in light of our knowledge of the historical narrative and deconstructive theory assist us in resurrecting these children and offering them subjectivity? In reading crooked we focus on the way these children are treated by their own environments, and we can reconsider what it means to be a child in America, thereby opening up alternative ways to grow. To do so, besides recognizing the social narrative, is to identify the ways in which culture and discourses label these children as “crooked.” How are their queer, disabled childhoods identified or perceived?
Childhood is Deformed and Perverse: Gender and Sexuality

In order to interrogate the normative script, we must understand what makes a child “crooked.” In Vivyan C. Adair’s work on poor women and children, she argues that socially constructed, deviant positions are “systematically produced through . . . twentieth century forces of socialization and discipline,” and the bodies in these positions are “physically inscribed, punished, and displayed as the dangerous or pathological other” (454). These forces of socialization and discipline inscribe both metaphorical and physical meaning on bodies by assigning them to constructed categories. Drawing from Adair’s assertion that the child is a "created other" and thus is subject to these kinds of disciplinary inscriptions on the body, I argue that queer and disability discourses overlap. Children not only stand in rhetorically for American ideals of whiteness, wholeness, wellness, and straightness, but they must also be protected so that they may enter adulthood and physically reproduce these norms. However, queer and disabled bodies fail to reproduce the norm. Because the very bodies of crooked children cannot participate in nation building, society ensures that this crookedness is weeded out of the national soil, or as Morrison phrases it, “This [American] soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers” (206). Non-normative children cannot inhabit either the position of the ideal child or the (future) heterosexual adult body.

Sherwood Anderson illustrates this type of social marking in *Winesburg, Ohio*. In the language Anderson uses to depict Jesse Bentley, the narrative inscribes him with certain qualities. The narrator describes him as a “slight, sensitive-looking [young] man,” “small and very slender and womanish of body,” “delicately built” who “by the standards of his day . . . did not look like a man at all” (31-2). Physically he does not fit normative masculine ideals. In fact,
his body is “womanish.” While he could be simply small, which many of the descriptions state, the language adds “delicate,” “slight,” and “sensitive,” implying effeminacy or impotence (Gleeson-White 51). The narrator goes on to describe Jesse’s mouth as “like the mouth of a sensitive and very determined child” (32). By depicting him as feminine or queer, the text implies that Jesse is weak, underdeveloped, or inadequate. In not looking like a man at all, or appearing “womanish” (at a time when women were often described as childlike or needing protection), Jesse must logically, as neither man nor woman, be a child. His mouth, the means by which discourse and power may emerge from his body, is like that of a child, and thus while “determined” is still inconsequential.

I do not want to develop an alternative essentializing discourse by suggesting that all children are to some extent crooked. Rather, I seek to unveil this cultural discourse of normal or “other” and the diverse child bodies reduced to these two options (“normal” or “other”) by looking at the language used to delineate them.

The far-reaching effect of the social negotiations of, anxiety around, and cultural discourse on childhood, disability, and queerness can be seen in biographical aspects of authors such as Sherwood Anderson and Carson McCullers. In his Memoirs, he illustrates how he dealt with the public visibility of homosexuality, such as when a gay man Anderson deems a “fairy” whom he passed by on his way to work calls out to him: “He [a fairy] went off along the street, turning to throw a kiss at me, and I stood dumbly staring at him. What did it all mean? I felt a strange unhealth within myself. I was not angry and I am quite sure that, when this happened, I felt even a kind of pity. There was a kind of door opened, as though I looked down through the door into a kind of dark pit, a place of monstrous shapes, a world of strange unhealth” (339-40).
Anderson here illustrates the cultural perspective that queerness is the same as disability, and that such conditions may be dangerously contagious, as he feels “a strange unhealth” when interacting with this man (though he also reveals his empathy with freaks and grotesques because he was “not angry”). His story perpetuates the social stereotypes that foster American nationhood by exposing ambivalences toward them. Carson McCullers, on the other hand, lived crookedly: beginning as a child she exhibited qualities of queerness and disability through her life. As a child, her “odd clothing and awkward body drew the contempt of her more feminine classmates, who threw rocks at her because she was ‘freakish-looking’ and ‘queer’” (Adams 557). McCullers continued to express her gender and sexuality non-normatively, and she lived with a chronic illness (Adams 551). In her texts she repeatedly depicts crooked children’s navigation of a culture that rejects them and the impact of the normative narrative on these children.

Since children are not “supposed” to be queer or disabled, society must find a way to deal with the reality of crooked children. Through their very existence, these children reveal that there is an alternative to the national heteronarrative. To defuse the perceived threat these crooked bodies declare in their very being, categories are institutionalized, such as tomboy and sissy, within which to comfortably enfold these non-normative children. However, these positions have necessary temporal strictures: society permits this nonconformance but only as a “stage” in an eventual coming of age. If children do not fall into the normalized rhythms of life after this institutionally sanctioned, temporally-bound exception, America offers limited options for living. And many of the literary crooked children in these texts die, commit suicide, go mad, or face societal banishment and isolation.

The dominant patriarchal values inherent in the national narrative demand that children
embody normative gender expectations, as national symbols and future reproductive members. Crooked children evoke social anxiety because they diverge from these expectations. Crooked children deviate from the nationally accepted understanding of how bodies are read as gendered, and what each gendered body can be and do. Tomboys and sissies are stereotypes for “strange” children, those who dress or act outside of the boundaries of their gender, but who will grow out of this phase into their “correct” gender and sexuality. For example, Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is “a gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve . . . [who] at first glance [looks] like a very young boy” (16). Her physical noncompliance to femininity mirrors her internal rebellion and a reaction to the false, culturally fixed conception of gender. She rejects the role scripted for her as a child; she discordantly plays against national rhythms, expressing alternative desires such as wishing never to be part of the reproductive order and wanting to transgress her gender. At one point in a new, empty house (the ultimate domestic, feminine space) she “crossed over to the opposite wall and wrote a very bad word—PUSSY, and beneath that she put her initials too” (33). As society marks her, she in turn marks institutionalized values, asserting her identity by signing her name alongside a pejorative word like those that have marked her as crooked. Her community seeks to assert control over her, disempowering her in considering her alterity a tomboyish phase, and consistently reminds her that she will straighten out in both body and identity. Her sister voices the dominant discourse: “‘Are you just going to tramp around the room all day? It makes me sick to see you in those silly boy’s clothes. Somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave,’ Etta said” (37). These crooked children must be disciplined for “acting out.”
Despite society’s attempts to contain it by framing it, the crooked narrative does not constitute a slight detour in progressive development. Tomboys and sissies are not children who have either innocently or cheekily wandered off the normalized track and who must simply be brought back into line. Tomboys and sissies are “distinct bodily identities” that normally express homosexuality (Abate xxvii). Sissies are boys who may have a “soft, feminine face,” an unathletic build, or a range of health problems (Grant 829). Tomboys are girls who possess masculine traits like athleticism or harder, male physiques. The novels I am examining demonstrate the cultural understanding of what constitutes a tomboy or sissy in their depiction of these categories. Mick, a tomboy herself, describes her brother, Bubber (Ralph), as not “a sissy like Spareribs said. He just loved pretty things . . . ‘Bubber—he looks sick, and likes pretty things, but he’s got guts underneath that’” (Heart 142). She not only can pinpoint the qualities of his body and nature that are socially deemed crooked, but she also comprehends that she must protect him from such a labeling and its severe consequences. Other children, such as Frankie, internalize the normative narrative and thus learn to loath their crookedness, internalizing their environment’s condemnation: “This summer she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long . . . Her hair had been cut like a boy’s, but it had not been cut for a long time and was now not even parted. The reflection in the glass was warped and crooked, but Frankie knew well what she looked like” (Member 462). American culture acts as a symbolic mirror, revealing to Frankie how she should see herself, yet this perception is unnatural and artificial. It is this social reflection, not her actual self, that is

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\(^c\) The language of both Anderson and McCullers (their use of “freak” or “queer”) deserves future consideration as their usage displays how their deployment changed in the period I am considering and affected the cultural construction of crookedness.
“crooked.” She litters her description of herself with self-deprecating comments, but her subjective commentary (her “freakish” tallness, her “too long” legs) carries the tone of objectivity because socially, these qualities are presented as natural and negative. Reading between her comments, we see that she is a white, middle-class, able-bodied child, but despite that she apparently meets the visible normative expectations, society interprets her as disabled and queer because of her gender and sexual deviance.\(^d\)

Sissies may be even more easily understood as disabled, since they exhibit incapacity like frailty or illness as compared to normative masculine ideals of strength or physicality. Tomboys, however, are just as disabled. Because disability is a social construction based on collectively-accepted ideas of what a body should be and do, tomboys’ extreme embodiment or hyperphysicality, compared to normative ideals of feminine delicacy and weakness, may be perceived as social impairment.\(^e\) Since gender is intimately tied to sexual orientation in the social imaginary, in deviating from gender norms, tomboys and sissies must logically deviate from sexual norms. Androgynous or queer children do not fit the gender binary on which heterosexuality is founded.\(^f\) Therefore, the dominant public labels them as homosexual, and since homosexuality carries a social stigma, it inscribes immorality on these crooked bodies.

\(^d\) Frankie disgustedly recoils from a heterosexual interaction she has and does not adhere to feminine traits, even when she ardently tries to do so.
\(^e\) Critical works such as Michelle Ann Abate’s *Tomboys* or Claudia Nelson’s *Boys Will Be Girls* (on British culture) thoughtfully detail the historical shifting of the national narratives and their gendered implications. At different times, qualities of tomboys and sissies were accepted, such as with the New Woman, flappers, or dandies. However, these positions were only temporarily approved of and never eclipsed dominant masculine and feminine ideals.
\(^f\) This queer androgyny is expressed at the level of discourse through naming. Crooked children often have ambiguous names, such as Mick, or if they have names that culturally qualify gender, such as Candace, they are obscured with nicknames like Caddy. While Frankie’s real name, Frances, is androgynous, at least when said aloud, she masculinizes her name to Frankie, then excessively feminizes it to F. Jasmine, eventually reaching a settled, crooked position back at Frances. Benjy’s family changes his name from Maury when they realize he is crooked, seeking to disassociate him from normative culture and the person for whom he was named, whom his mother admires (misguidedly).
By reading crookedly and thus adjusting one’s positionality, one can witness these texts’ depiction of the large-scale ejecting and othering of crooked children, as well as the damage of this societal process and its repetition. *The Turn of the Screw* depicts how the suspicion of crookedness can elicit extreme anxiety, which is in turn expressed through uncompromising force. It is this force that eradicates any hint of crookedness and its contaminating potential. To stabilize this process, the narrative must be repeated throughout history, revealing society’s inability to fully institute conventions or eliminate crooked alternatives to this national script. Such repetitions may be seen depicted in *Wineburg, Ohio*’s Willard family. George Willard’s mother Elizabeth in *Winesburg, Ohio* was a crooked child. The narrator recounts a wild girlhood when she brazenly dressed as a man and cavorted with travelling men (20). In these actions she freely expressed desires not sanctioned by the able-bodied heteronarrative. Though the narrator claims that Elizabeth marries George’s father, Tom, to discover the appeal or “hidden significance” of marriage, I argue that she does so in order to avoid isolation. With her father ill and her peers coupling up, she “didn’t want to be a bad woman” (48). Though her father offers her a cache of money to escape marrying Tom (and arguably her set chrononormative role), she marries, probably because with no models (since society silences or removes them) she cannot imagine what other options she may have. History repeats itself with Elizabeth’s son George. Tom berates George for his non-normativity, reminding him that he is “not a woman” (and thus not “a fool”) so he should not act “like a gawky girl” (19). Elizabeth senses her son’s kindred spirit and knows how this narrative ends: “Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself” (19). She let herself by changed by her
environment and hopes her son does not have to lose himself to find his social place. A fundamental problem with the normative national script is that it affects the minds and imaginations of all American citizens. Children cannot visualize extending their difference into adulthood or building a meaningful life around their crookedness, since society allows no models for this alternative. In publicly acknowledging that the narrative is not inherent and natural, we subvert its essentiality and open up space for alternatives.

Often crooked children navigate their difficulty (in finding a place within a culture that deems them broken or inadequate) by themselves reading the societal narrative crookedly. They appropriate this seemingly inescapable and antagonistic script and reposition themselves within it. Consider Caddy’s reading of a fairy tale. She takes this traditional, patriarchal narrative and rejects how the text positions her as female reader: “When I was little there was a picture in one of our books, a dark place into which a single weak ray of light came slanting up on two faces lifted out of the shadow. You know what I’d do if I were King? she never was a queen or a fairy she was always a king or a giant or a general I’d break that place open and drag them out and I’d whip them good” (Sound 109). Caddy does not rewrite the narrative. Instead she reconsiders its and adjusts it, disregarding the gendered boundaries and envisioning herself in a masculine position of power. While this transgression would often necessitate social punishment, in her version she doles out the punishment to those who would seek to oppress (“I’d whip them good”), thereby interrogating the existent narrative and its ethics (which reading crookedly aspires to do).

John Henry and Frankie also use their liminal position as crooked children to bend or blur the narrative’s boundaries. As Caddy’s transgression identifies, gender plays a fundamental part
in the national narrative, so these children reposition themselves by imaginatively de- and re-
constructing their socially scripted bodies. Within their anti-family, thus in a space safely
separate from dominant culture, John Henry, Frankie, and Berenice reconstitute sexual norms
according to a new paradigm:

She [Frankie] planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from
boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted . . . And then John Henry
would very likely add his two cents’ worth about this time, and think that people
ought to be half boy and half girl, and when the old Frankie threatened to take
him to the Fair and sell him to the Freak Pavilion, he would only close his eyes
and smile. (Member 547)

By dismissing traditional, culturally-constructed gender and sexual binaries, Frankie and John
Henry break down the social understandings of disability and queerness. If people may change or
possess both genders, bodies lose stability and transgress; it becomes (more) difficult to define
what constitutes a normative body. Since heterosexuality defines itself on a gender-based sexual
orientation, it cannot sustain itself in a world where bodies express both genders at different
times or at once (“half boy and half girl”). For example, if a person could change whether he or
she were a man or a woman as desired, would that person’s orientation change with sex, and how
would that alteration, based on an act of deliberate choice, affect the structuring of
heterosexuality as a fixed category? Queerness, like disability, would become a precarious
“other” on which to base personal or national identity, which is traditionally the means by which
these identities have been fostered.

Though these children reposition themselves in order to adjust their bodies’ legibility,
this change in positionality does not alter the national narrative, and society eventually enacts violent discipline on these imaginative children. In these texts, John Henry dies, Caddy is ejected from the community (and not even mentioned in the familial and communal narrative), and Frankie, at least externally, submits to cultural expectations.

Frankie, John Henry, and Caddy’s imaginative repositioning illustrates that crooked children possess alternative desires, and their sexual experiences reveal that heterosexuality is “neither natural nor universally pleasurable” (Adams 562). Normalized narratives of progression and growth imply the inevitability and necessity of such interactions as an eventual part of the entrance into adulthood. Crooked children’s tentative ventures into heterosexuality mentally, and often physically, injure them, mirroring how the national narrative violates and damages crooked children. Consider Enoch Robinson in *Winesburg, Ohio*: “Nothing ever turned out for Enoch Robinson . . . He was always a child and that was a handicap to his worldly development” (92).

Enoch’s child-like nature is viewed socially as disability (and leads to his later physical impairment), but in changing the position of this reading, we can see Enoch as a subversive crooked child who resists “worldly development.” However, a woman eventually dispels his happiness, expelling him from his separate, self-constructed world of imaginary friends, in which he was “happy as a child is happy” (95). Her presence enforces the normative heteronarrative Enoch has to participate in and so he must abandon his prohibited crookedness. Enoch is folded into society, lessening his life. While before he felt pride and happiness in his invented life, he becomes “an obscure, jerky little figure, bobbing up and down on the streets of an Ohio town” (95). We can read this story as a symbolic playing out of the national narrative’s impact on crooked children and its ultimate cost.
In many of the texts, the looming heterosexual script inspires fear in and commits violence on the children. Mick and Harry, for example, are two queer children who succumb to societal pressure and perform as they believe they should by having sex: “They both turned at the same time. They were close against each other. She felt him trembling and her fists were tight enough to crack. ‘Oh, God,’ he kept saying over and over. It was like her head was broke off from her body and thrown away. And her eyes looked up straight into the blinding sun while she counted something in her mind. And then this was the way. This was how it was” (Heart 235). Mick’s reaction is almost martyr-like in that she suffers through the experience despite the ways in which it ravages her physically and emotionally; she, for example, imagines herself dying through decapitation during the act. After the fact, Harry cries, while Mick stoically blocks out the experience, acting out opposite traditional gender roles. Their queer expressions of distress reveal how this sexual interaction has not “straightened them out” as their communities might wish. Instead, they are just burdened with knowledge and pain. Though Harry claims, “We got to understand this,” Mick gets the meaning of their liaison—“This was the way. This was how it was” (Heart 235). In other words, Mick wearily understands what the nation requires of its citizens—adherence to its standards despite how this adherence affects actual individuals. Ironically, after this harrowing experience, others seem to sense a change in her. Her depression and diminishment appear to others as a coming into herself as an adult woman, or as Portia says, “She walk around and don’t say a word. She not even greedy like she used to be. She getting to be a regular lady these days” (Heart 270). In her text McCullers illustrates the brutal means by which crooked children become “regular.”
The narrative’s violence begets violence in return. Frankie’s straight sexual interactions fill her with self-loathing, shame, and physical disgust. The narrator tells us that the “sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach” (*Member 482*). Later when on a date with a soldier, she experiences “uneasy doubt that she could not quite place or name” that turns out to be warranted as the soldier almost rapes her (*Member 482*). These literal and metaphorical assaults on Frankie provoke reciprocal rage and aggression from her. Like Mick she tries not to think of the event, but when she does she “want[s] to throw a knife between his eyes” (*Member 534*). Other characters express similar hostility against norms. Miles (according to the Governess and the school) is “an injury to the others” (*Turn 10*). No story more clearly illustrates the aggression of and engendered by society’s imposition the national narrative on children than that of Bubber and Baby in *The Member of the Wedding*. The text sets up Baby as the ideal child. She exudes feminine traits, and Lucille, her mother, places all her future hopes in her daughter. Bubber, on the other hand, is a sissy. When Baby walks by one day, Bubber, playing with a BB gun, calls to her and queerly asks her if he can touch her pink outfit and accessories. When she ignores him, he shoots her and the violence of his actions is depicted in graphic detail: “Her skirt was over her head, showing her pink panties and white legs. Her hands were open—in one there was the prize from the candy and in the other the pocketbook. There was blood all over her hair ribbon and the top of her yellow curls. She was shot in the head and her face was turned down toward the

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* Another important example of societal violence on crooked children is Benjy’s castration and effectual removal from the reproductive narrative. Quentin also recounts how castration may be a version of self-harm that enables one to escape the narrative and its pressures: “Versh told me about a man who mutilated himself. He went into the woods and did it with a razor, sitting in a ditch. A broken razor flinging them backward over his shoulder the same motion complete the jerked skein of blood backward not looping. But that’s not it. It’s not not having them. It’s never to have had them then I could say O” (73). Quentin bemoans the burden of the heterosexual narrative that exists from the very beginning of one’s life.
ground” (143). Bubber can be read as enacting the death of the child Lee Edelman proposes in *No Future*. He envies Baby’s position in the social order that denies him, so he shoots Baby. In doing so, he performatively rejects the child, the figure of society and its reproductive national narrative. When felled, her body represents dominant society—the innocence of childhood (“her pink panties and white legs”) and the entitlement and socioeconomic power of white, middle-class, able, straight bodies (her prize and pocketbook).

But crooked children are not able to protest their social marginalization in any meaningful or lasting way; through physically and metaphorically reproducing itself, the national narrative will sustain itself and continue to “other” crooked children. Only through actively and repeatedly interrogating this national narrative and unveiling that it is not the pre-existing natural order but the *naturalized* order imposed by society, can we effect any widespread change. As Biff Brannon says at the end of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* about the strict dichotomies in life, “Why was it that the smartest people mostly missed that point? By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real young and old age. Because often old men’s voices grew high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches” (113). Biff’s comments declare the need to reconsider dominant thought on the scripts available for identity based upon the diverse lived experiences of (real or literary) children.
Childhood is in a Crooked Course or Position: Perception

Since cultural representations of identities affect our construction of reality, by examining these texts and revealing the potentiality for alternative positionality, we can affirm the subjecthood of these children that society sought to undermine or take away. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison illustrates the cultural positionality I have exposed in this paper. Pecola, at one point, goes to buy penny candy from the local grocery store, along the way savoring her surroundings. She feels the “sweet, endurable, even cherished irritation, full of promise and delicate security” of the meager change stored in her shoes. She sees dandelions by a telephone post and wonders why most people “call them weeds” and value clean, weedless yards, as she thinks they are “pretty.” The broken sidewalk frequently causes her, with her “sloughing step,” to fall. Instead of thinking of its flaws, she considers its potential: how good it would be to roller skate on, especially in comparison to a newly paved street. As the narrator explains Pecola’s position,

These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned that crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her (48).

She clings to the crooked things around her, feeling an affinity with them. Though most people consider them nuisances, these objects are a part of the world, and she recognizes and identifies with their beauty and position. However, after she goes to buy her candy and is utterly ignored

\(^h\) Pecola’s blackness and ugliness are sources of her “crookedness,” not to mention her incestual pregnancy as culturally deemed evidence of aberrant sexuality.
by the shopkeeper (she’s treated as non-existent because “for him there is nothing to see”), her perception changes:

Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, “They are ugly. They are weeds.”

Preoccupied with that revelation, she trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. (49)

With reflection, Pecola’s position changes to that of the dominant culture, which views the sidewalk, the dandelions, and herself in the same way, as nothing. She understands that unless she can enter this culture with its constructed notions of perception and value, she will not have “a reality and presence . . . an awareness of worth.” Pecola seeks the bluest eyes not only so the world will see her differently, but also so she will see the world as the socially and narratively privileged see it. Instead, because of the futility of her quest, she goes mad, only receiving what she wishes for in a fantasy unhinged from reality, with her “blue eyes” standing as a parody of the national fantasy that imposes itself on everything and everyone to their destruction.

Morison powerfully illustrates the issues I am confronting in this work. In giving us Pecola’s point of view, she offers up a destabilization of naturalness; her perception reveals that there are alternative positions to the dominant one taken up by the white, immigrant, male shopkeeper (who, barely standing inside the boundaries as an immigrant, would more fervently apply America’s standards to all people). Claudia, in this quote, reveals that the only societal role allowed to Pecola is as “other,” the deviant body against which to define those standards: “[She

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was] among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness” (205).\footnote{The Bluest Eye serves as such a rich text to read crookedly that all my thoughts cannot be included in this paper, but it is worth noting that further analysis will consider Pecola’s mother Pauline and her disability, race, and the Breedloves’ internalized sense of ugliness (or physical queerness).} Claudia describes how even she is guilty of this “othering”; the text implicates us all, Americans who do nothing while this institutionalized marginalization occurs.

The crooked children in these texts serve as figures similar to Pecola within the national imaginary. With America’s politics focused on social and physical reproduction and inheritance, society situates the child as the site for identity production. The resultant constructed identities possess a visible, bodily element in both the ideal and deviant that must be interrogated because these “visible” elements are subjective and socially inscribed. I am asking, What is a child? What is a queer? What is a disability? What are the means by which society facilitates these categories and images within the cultural memory?

I have considered these questions by looking at texts within the dominant culture in which these crooked children are discursively and physically produced. Davidson and Siebers explain that cultural constructions are affected by the environments in which they are produced: “Disability studies reconsiders the epistemology, language, and symbolic networks by which we define the transmission and construction of knowledge. If ability is socially and symbolically produced in the manner of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, then we can no longer conceive of disability as individual physical or mental defects. The defect is located in the environments,
institutions, languages and paradigms of knowledge made inaccessible to people with disabilities, and we have a responsibility to remove it” (499). So position affects politics. Readers and scholars must be attuned to the dominant culture’s changes, in language, knowledge-making, politics, over time because cultural conditions affect the production of identities. If one can understand what is “normalized” through these knowledge-making processes, one can deconstruct the norm, step outside of that dominant, normalized position, and approach crooked positions.

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, for example. Carson McCullers illustrates how positionality affects perception and actions. The lost, crooked characters—Mick, Biff, Dr. Copeland, and Blount—search for someone to understand them since their culture cannot. They each find this person in Mr. Singer who is mute, “For they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that” (82). As America uses the figure of the child as a vessel for containing all its social hopes and anxieties, so do these characters use Mr. Singer to find meaning and acceptance, and in turn Mr. Singer does the same to Antonopoulos, a childlike, disabled man. However, this is a one-sided relationship because these characters cannot understand Mr. Singer (which is ultimately better for their purposes); in the same way, society constructs children as they wish them to be, not as they are. Biff Brannon comments on how the process of constructing a person as you want him to be is unnatural, much like the cultural production of the queer, disabled children I examine; he wonders: “Why did everyone persist in thinking the mute was exactly as they wanted him to be—when most likely it was a very queer mistake?” (192). His rumination underscores how this
cyclical process can collapse; when Antonopolous dies, Mr. Singer kills himself, and in turn each of the characters gives up in his or her own way.

Portia explains the damage of this process to her father, which I argue can apply to the national narrative and its mobilization of children, “A person can’t pick up they children and just squeeze them to which-a-way they wants them to be. Whether it hurt them or not. Whether it right or wrong” (Heart 68). Dr. Copeland, like the dominant white culture, seeks to affect his community through children, and Portia’s comment rejects this reproductive futurism.\(^1\) I can only begin to hint at a train of thought this project needs to and will in the future follow—the intersections of race with queerness, disability, and childhood.\(^k\)

At this historical moment Americans strove to deal with the presence of black bodies in spaces geographic, economic, religious, educational, and social that they may never have occupied before.\(^l\) American society faced its hundreds-year-long anxiety over black bodies and its attitudes about such bodies. Within the national imaginary, black bodies shared crooked traits with children, queers, and disabled persons. Society deemed African Americans mentally undeveloped and so compared them to children. Black women and men were perceived as queer because of their supposedly voracious sexual appetites and feared for their ability to taint or weaken (disable) white blood. With their reproduction, they weakened and infected dominant white society. Black bodies were also culturally considered disabled in that their bodies did not

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\(^{1}\) It should be noted that Carson McCullers portrays Dr. Copeland sympathetically, lending intelligence and passion to his character in a period of racial prejudice, and sympathetically depicting his tireless commitment to his community and their education and health. His imitation of culture’s method of possessing and sustaining the dominant discourse into the future illustrates his desire to help his community, however misguided.

\(^k\) Another avenue I could not explore in this thesis but that deserves further thought is the role of appearance and beauty culture on the societal production of crookedness.

\(^l\) For this discussion I referenced Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique.*
meet norms. Depictions of black people with exaggerated parts or disproportionate bodies were popular at this time, and black bodies drew crowds at freak shows.

Authors at this time understood these symbolic connections and regularly represented relationships between crooked children and non-white characters; often these non-white characters, like Dilsey, Roskus, Portia, or Berenice, suggest uncanny knowledge or perception as these crooked children also do. In fact, in *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie witnesses, “In the alley were only two colored boys, one taller than the other and with his arm resting on the short boy’s shoulder. That was all—but something about the angle or the way they stood, or the pose of their shapes, had reflected the sudden picture of her brother and the bride that had so shocked her” (526). Frankie experiences an uncanny moment where she seems to subconsciously realize that the normative image of her brother and his bride can only exist in being compared to and promoted over “othered” bodies. For their heterosexual, ideal union to exist as the ultimate representative for the reproductive national narrative, an opposite, flawed, dark version must exist, whether in crooked or black bodies.

But the only reason this alternate scene is oppositional, flawed, and dark, is that the nation needs it to be and judges it as such; on the contrary, this project aims to unearth this crooked narrative and deconstruct its alterity. In these novels and in crooked children, we find a different, generative position and new social possibilities for being and belonging in America. When we denaturalize the dominant narrative, we necessarily must move outside of this position, and in doing so, we may step into new positions of perception, like those of these crooked children. Often representations of crooked children may have served only to fulfill cultural stereotypes or traditional narratives for non-normative children, but if we take the crooked
position, if we read their narratives with historical and theoretical awareness of the sort I have worked through in this project, we can find meaning in their narratives and different ways of positioning American children and ourselves in the world. With Frankie, we see the beauty in crookedness: “That afternoon was like the center of the cake that Berenice had baked last Monday, a cake which failed. The old Frankie had been glad the cake had failed, not out of spite, but because she loved these fallen cakes the best. She enjoyed the damp, gummy richness near the center, and did not understand why grown people thought such cakes a failure” (Member 526). Frankie perceives things differently from institutionally normalized ways, thus inviting an alternative to the oppressive societal expectations. In Winesburg, Ohio, Wing Biddlebaum advises George to also see crookedly, “You must try to forget all you have learned, said the old man. You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of voices “ (Ohio 11). We can also read a call to us, as readers, to do the same. We can step outside dominant, white, middle-class, able bodied, straight society and its expectations in order to view the world differently. For as Garland-Thomson has said, representations affect society and its norms. These novels show the grim effects on the crooked bodies needed to bolster the normative narrative. John Henry, Miles, and Quentin die; Flora and Baby are afflicted and altered; Frankie, Mick, Ralph, and George must leave their fruitful, crooked childhoods behind and fold into society; Caddy and Benjy are ejected from society. This atrocious role-call signifies the violent cycle produced through the national narrative’s circulation and the impact this narrative has on children.
Frankie explains to herself and to readers that “it was a need so strong this want to be known and recognized” (Member 513). In reading crooked, we can reposition ourselves to know and recognize these children and the alternative American narrative they embody.
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