in literary narratives. Where could one locate more affirming depictions of people with



disabilities? Weren't literary and artistic archives perverse in their representational

distortions of the disabled body? Didn't one become disheartened over time with the unbearable symbolic weight of literary characterizations? This is, not to mention, the central issue of how study in the humanities could contribute to the pragmatic needs of disabled communities and the contemporary political

rights movement!

Beginning nearly 30 years ago, a resurgence of concern over the consequences of dehumanizing representations (i.e., monster, freak, madman, suffering innocent, hysteric, beggar) of the disabled has resulted in suspicion over the ultimate utility of representational studies about disability.

Truly, literary and historical texts have rarely appeared to offer disabled characters in developed, "positive" portraits.[3] But the belief that literary study has little to offer our more politicized understandings of disability experience rests uncomfortably with us.

Previously, proponents of the universality in art

had sought to salvage the significance of disabled literary characterizations by viewing them as evidence for inherent frailties in what used to be called "the human condition." For example, Herbert Blau (1981) defends literary portraits of disability by explaining that they cause us to "concede that we are all, at

some warped level of the essentially human, impaired" (p. 10). A catalogue of disabled representations in literature includes some of the most influential figurations of "suffering humanity" across periods and cultures: the crippled Greek god, Hephaistos; Montaigne's sexually potent limping women;

Shakespeare's hunchbacked king, Richard III; Frankenstein's deformed monster; Brontë's madwoman in the attic; Melville's one-legged, monomaniacal Captain Ahab; Nietzsche's philosophical grotesques; Hemingway's wounded war veterans; Morrison's truncated and scarred

ex-slaves; Borges's blind librarians; and Oe's brain-damaged son. Astonishingly, this catalogue of "warped" humanity proves as international as it does biologically varied. Why does disability characterization so often result in indelible, albeit overwrought, literary portraits? With this in mind,

the exchange between Stiker and Longmore takes on the contours of a disciplinary crisis that needs to be theorized directly.

We suggest that the "problem" of disability representation is the result of two predominating modes of historical address: overheated symbolic imagery and

disability as a pervasive tool of artistic characterization. Yet while scholars in literary and cultural studies have produced important readings of individual disabled characters and the centrality of disabled types to specific genres, we have largely neglected to theorize the utility of humanities work for