

# Scholar@UPRM

## **"If you should ever want an arm": Disability and dependency in Edgar Allan Poe's "The man that was used up"**

Item Type	Essay
Authors	Warne, Vanessa
Publisher	Centro de Publicaciones Académicas, Facultad de Artes y Ciencias, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez
Download date	2026-05-19 19:37:51
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3314">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3314</a>

**“IF YOU SHOULD EVER WANT AN ARM”:  
DISABILITY AND DEPENDENCY IN EDGAR ALLAN  
POE’S “THE MAN THAT WAS USED UP”**

*Vanessa Warne*

In his 1839 short story “The Man that Was Used Up,” Edgar Allan Poe enlists the body of a military hero to examine connections between colonial conflict and technological innovation. At a public meeting, the tale’s narrator meets Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith, a veteran of territorial battles with the Kickapoo and Bugaboo tribes. Fascinated by Smith’s handsome appearance and reputation for bravery, the narrator is anxious to learn more about him. When acquaintances fail to provide adequate information, he visits the General at home. There, in the private space of Smith’s dressing room, he is made privy to disturbing truths about the war hero: the General, whose body appears attractive and robust in public, has been radically transformed by war. Reduced to a “large and exceedingly odd looking bundle” (135), he lacks arms, shoulders and legs; is missing his tongue, palate, teeth and scalp; and has lost both eyes. As the horrified narrator looks on, a black valet named Pompey installs a series of prostheses, returning the dismembered veteran’s body to an appearance of wholeness and health. The story ends with the narrator’s proclamation that “General John A.B.C. Smith was the man—was *the man that was used up*” (137).

Critics have identified various historical sources for Poe’s tale. William Whipple has, for example, read the story as a political satire targeting Richard M. Johnson, Martin Van Buren’s vice-presidential running mate and a veteran of several violent campaigns against Native peoples. Elmer Pry takes a different approach, arguing that the story draws on early American folktales about army captains and settlers who removed false teeth, a wig and a cork leg in order to astonish and intimidate Indian adversaries. Critics have also noted the tale’s engagement with the history of slavery. While David Leverenz has commented on the tale’s comic representation of a slave figure,

Joan Dayan has examined the General's dependence on Pompey and the slave class he represents. Dependency of a different kind has been discussed by critics interested in Poe's portrayal of the General's prostheses. Klaus Benesch has paid particular attention to the General's reliance on technology, arguing that the tale is one in which "history and technology are brought into conjunction through the cybernetic body of an authentic historical figure" (109-110).

Benesch's vision of the General as cyborg, as a hybrid of the human and the machine, characterizes his prostheses as essential parts of his body and, by extension, his identity. Joan Tyler Mead strikes a similar note when she labels the General "a robot" (281), as does Daniel Hoffmann when he describes Smith as "a mechanismus, a puppet" (199). This article offers a different reading of Poe's tale, one that understands prosthesis not as integral but as supplemental to Smith's disabled body. Shifting the focus from technology to disability, I argue that Poe uses the wounded body of the General to explore and express a range of anxieties about disability and dependency. I also propose ways in which Poe's portrayal of disability can be read as a critique of contemporary economic transformations in the new American nation, notable among them, the early nineteenth-century development of a modern capitalist marketplace.

\* \* \*

The delayed discovery of the General's disability both provides Poe with a climactic ending to his tale and works to characterize disability as secret and mysterious. When he first sees Smith, the narrator admires the apparent perfection of the General's body. Unaware of his severe injuries and unable to perceive signs of disability, he views the General as a model of masculine beauty and strength. Indeed, the narrator's comments suggest that the prostheses not only mask the General's injuries, but also make him unusually attractive:

His head of hair would have done honor to a Brutus;—nothing could be more richly flowing, or possess a higher gloss. It was of jetty black;—which was also the color, or more properly the no colour, of his unimaginable whiskers. You perceive that I cannot speak of the latter without enthusiasm; it was not too much to say that they were the handsomest pair of whiskers under the sun. At all events, they encircled, and at times partially overshadowed, a mouth utterly unequalled. Here were the most entirely even, and the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth. (127-128)

The narrator's admiring and desirous description does not end with the General's face: his bust is "the finest bust I ever saw," the shoul-

ders are “perfection,” and the legs are pronounced “the *ne plus ultra* of good legs” (128). In a particularly telling passage, the narrator exclaims, “In the matter of eyes, also, my acquaintance was pre-eminently endowed. Either one of such a pair was worth a couple of the ordinary ocular organs” (128). Instinctively transforming what he believes to be bodily organs into commodities, the narrator describes Smith’s eyes as exchangeable items. It is only at the end of the story that both he and the reader learn that this response is perfectly appropriate: the General’s eyes have indeed been purchased to replace the natural ones he lost to the colonial endeavour.

The narrator’s commodification of Smith’s eyes is one indication that the General’s hidden disabilities are intuited but not fully recognized by the narrator. The narrator’s description of the “rectangular precision, attending his every movement” (129) is also suggestive of this intuition, as is his discussion of the artistic quality of Smith’s body parts. He explains, for instance, that the General’s shoulders would have “called up a blush of conscious inferiority into the countenance of the marble Apollo” (128). The comparison of Smith to a statue and the narrator’s image of blushing stone are revealing. Figuring Smith and the statue as competing models of human perfection, the narrator obscures the boundary between the artificial and the real, a form of confusion echoed by his description of the General’s arms as “admirably modelled” (128). Artistic discourse continues to inform his description of Smith’s body when he explains that “Every connoisseur in such matters admitted the legs to be good” (128) and when he wishes “to God my young and talented friend Chiponchipino, the sculptor, had but seen the legs” (128). Revealing more than an aesthete’s admiration for idealized forms of physical beauty, the narrator’s alignment of Smith’s body with works of high art blurs the distinction between flesh and stone, and demonstrates his preference for the artificial and the inanimate.

In sharp contrast to the narrator, who gives detailed, almost obsessive descriptions of the General, the other characters in the tale only manage to make vague and incomplete statements about Smith. In a pattern that is repeated six times, the narrator asks an acquaintance about the General but receives only vague responses concerning his valour and renown. Without exception, those he asks for information eventually begin to explain “he’s the man...” but are interrupted before they can complete the sentence. A preacher in church, an actor at the theatre, a gossipy partygoer, a woman with a question about Byron, the narrator and even Smith himself interrupt them, stopping the flow of information about the General and preventing the full revelation of Smith’s history and disability.

Significantly, these conversations are marked by a prosthetic quality of their own. With the exception of the narrator, speakers who stop the exchange of information begin their interruptions with the word “man.” Echoing the last word of the speaker they interrupt, they rely upon part of another statement to make a statement of their own, and, through repetition, create the illusion of an organic whole. The fragmented conversations that result frustrate the narrator but hint at and parallel the injuries done to the General’s body. Linguistic equivalents of the amputated body, they manifest facts about the General that are not expressed in language. Defined by broken sentences, incomplete explanations, and competing discourses, the society Poe portrays is one in which disability is discussed with difficulty, if at all. Only in the last line of the story, when he has witnessed the General’s prosthetic parts being put in place, can the narrator finally complete the oft-repeated but consistently unfinished phrase and announce, “Smith was the man—was *the man that was used up*” (137).

The completion of this statement, a statement which characterizes Smith as exhausted and consumed by war, is revealing. The transformation of fragments to something with the appearance of wholeness is both Poe’s subject and his primary narrative technique. Constructing disability as a secret to be uncovered, a mystery to be solved, Poe fetishizes the General’s bodily difference, portraying and stimulating curiosity about his body but reserving the revelation of his disability for the story’s conclusion. Significantly, the fact of Smith’s disability, disguised and hidden from the public gaze, is only revealed in the private, closeted space of a dressing room. Despite the domestic setting, the revelation of Smith’s injured state begins with impersonal violence and ends in spectacle:

As I entered the chamber, I looked about, of course, for the occupant, but did not immediately perceive him. There was a large and exceedingly odd looking bundle of something which lay close by my feet on the floor, and, as I was not in the best humor in the world, I gave it a kick out of the way.

‘Hem! ahem! rather civil that, I should say!’ said the bundle, in one of the smallest, and altogether the funniest little voices, between a squeak and a whistle, that I ever heard in all the days of my existence.

‘Ahem! rather civil that, I should observe.’

I fairly shouted with terror, and made off, at a tangent, into the farthest extremity of the room.

‘God bless me! My dear fellow,’ here again whistled the bundle, ‘what—what—what – why, what *is* the matter? I really believe you don’t know me at all.’

What *could* I say to this – what *could* I? I staggered into an arm-

chair, and, with staring eyes and open mouth, awaited the solution of the wonder. (135)

As if attending a private, one-man sideshow, the narrator finally sees what he had failed to “immediately perceive.” Watching Pompey install the General’s prostheses, the narrator refers to Smith as “the nondescript” (135), “the thing” (135) and “the object” (136). Fearful, characterized by violence, his reaction to bodily difference is problematic but highly predictable. Poe’s response to the disabled body is, however, more complicated. A fantasy about the amelioration of disability, his tale imagines artificial organs and limbs that can function in the place of missing body parts, allowing the General to perform actions, such as seeing, walking and talking, that would otherwise be impossible. Indeed, once fully equipped with artificial parts, the General is not—at least in any traditional sense of the word—disabled: fully mobile and sensate, he is freed of his dependence on Pompey and of the physical limitations resulting from his injuries.

This is, of course, a transparent fantasy of normalization, of a return of the disabled body not only to mobility and full sensory experience but also to a socially palatable appearance. Such a fantasy is necessarily bound up with a range of messages about disabled people. For Poe, disability is not simply a problem to be solved; it is also a secret to be kept and a condition to be hidden from the public gaze. Nor is this highly problematic fantasy lacking nightmarish dimensions. While the “odd looking bundle” is figured as grotesque and terrifies the narrator, the fully equipped General, heavily reliant on uncanny prostheses, provokes a different kind of fear. Presenting a powerfully deceptive appearance, he makes inanimate objects seem alive and, in doing so, obscures not only his injuries but also the distinction between the living and the dead. As such, he exists in stark contrast to later and more positive conceptions of the prosthetic body, notable among them Sigmund Freud’s vision of a prosthetic god and Donna Haraway’s theorization of a liberating cyborg body.<sup>1</sup> Poe’s tale imagines an escape from the appearance of disability, from immobility and from sensory limitations but it does not envision a parallel escape from the dehumanizing effects of dependency on prosthetic technology.

It is worth noting that the General is reliant not only on his prostheses but also on the economic system which produces and circulates

---

<sup>1</sup> For Freud on prosthesis, see Chapter 3 of *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Hogarth, 1930). For Donna Haraway on the cyborg, see *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

them. In this tale, the normalization of a disabled body is an emphatically commercial enterprise. Manufactured, advertised, and offered up for sale, the General's prostheses are clearly identified as commodities in a market economy. As Pompey installs his artificial parts, Smith expresses his high regard for the limbs and mechanisms that hide his losses. Creating a polemical distinction between bloodthirsty colonized and industrious colonizer, he explains,

'D—n the vagabonds! they not only knocked in the roof of my mouth, but took the trouble to cut off at least seven-eighths of my tongue. There isn't Bonfanti's equal, however, in America, for really good articles of this description. I can recommend you to him with confidence,' (here the General bowed,) 'and assure you that I have the greatest pleasure in so doing.' (137)

The General's characterization of native culture as violent is predictable, as is his characterization of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo as vagabonds. His pleasure in recommending a manufacturer of "really good" prosthetic limbs to the narrator is more curious. Naming the best makers and retailers, highlighting the various advantages of their products, and commenting on their competitors and prices, the General advertises his prosthetic parts to a man who has no need for them. He asserts, for instance, "that "Pettitt makes the best shoulders, but for a bosom you will have to go to Ducrow" (136). As his teeth are installed, he notes that "For a *good* set of these you had better go to Parmly's at once; high prices, but excellent work" (136). He also explains that "Thomas' ... is decidedly the best hand at a cork leg; but if you should ever want an arm, my dear fellow, you must really let me recommend you to Bishop" (135-136). These comments evoke a large and flourishing prostheses industry, an industry characterized by innovation, specialization and competition.

General Smith's recommendation of prosthetic limb manufacturers to a man with two legs and two arms may not be as misdirected as it initially seems. Poe's use of the word "want" in relation to an artificial arm plays on the word's dual meanings of "lack" and "desire," drawing attention to their confusion in a commodity culture. Indeed, the narrator's reaction to these statements, and to Smith more generally, reveals that the wanting of an artificial arm is not altogether outside of his experience. Although shocked by what he has seen, the narrator thanks Smith for his recommendations and describes himself as grateful for the General's advice. He is, in fact, strangely attracted to the General's artificial appendages. When Smith asks Pompey to attach one of his legs, the narrator admires its appearance and conveniences, explaining, "Pompey handed the bundle a very capital cork leg, already dressed, which it screwed on in a trice"

(135). Clearly impressed by the leg, the narrator, who is disgusted by the General's natural body, has nothing but praise for his prostheses. His attraction to the General's prostheses is, of course, most obvious in his initial, unwitting adoration of the General's artificial hair, teeth, eyes, shoulders and limbs. It is also apparent in the style of his introductory comments on the General: authoring a *blason du corps* worthy of a courtly lover, he praises the General in parts, starting with his hair and finishing with his legs.

What might a non-disabled narrator's attraction to a disabled soldier's prostheses mean? Broadly speaking, Poe's tale seeks to promote a reconsideration of how and why bodies are valued and desired. The reconsideration is not, however, limited to, or even focused on, issues of bodily difference. In this tale, Poe explores the ability of prosthetic parts to inspire desire in a narrator in order to offer up a multifaceted condemnation of the new marketplaces of early nineteenth-century America. Disability is, in other words, a useful tool for Poe, a means of investigating dependency and desire in the economic realm and, more specifically, in capitalist economies. A fascinating prefiguration of Marxist theorizations of commodity fetishism, Poe's story defines capitalist economies as dependent on desire rather than need, on want rather than lack. It can be read more narrowly as a response to the massive economic developments of the first four decades of the 1800s, when, caught up in a process that historian Charles Sellers has identified as "market revolution" (5), America witnessed a movement away from the self-sufficiencies of agricultural landownership and towards an integrated, specialized, and competitive manufacturing-based economy.

The years immediately preceding the composition of Poe's story were a particularly difficult stage in this larger transition. Currency problems and a banking crisis, paired with a severe depression, had prompted a re-evaluation of the new market model. Read in this context, the tale functions as a warning to formerly self-sufficient citizens who were—in the view of many contemporary social commentators—becoming quickly, unwittingly and dangerously caught up in the market, and in its conveniences and pleasures.<sup>2</sup> Whether aligned with the General, who must buy what he lacks, or the narrator, who desires what he doesn't need, consumers are being cautioned against forms of economic dependency. Caricatured as a system in

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Jacksonian economics, see Sellers. See also Hal Barron's *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1984) and Susan Previat and Peter Passell's *A New Economic View of American History* (New York: Norton, 1979).

which a cork leg can be advertised to and desired by a two-legged man, capitalist culture is scathingly satirized.<sup>3</sup>

Mobilizing the trope of physical disability in order to condemn the prosthetic and dependent nature of modern economic relations, Poe comments not only on the emergence of a culture of capitalist consumption but also on the related project of nation formation. Simultaneously an emblem of progress and of chaos, of gains and of losses, the disabled body of the General is an obvious synecdochic figure for the body politic of the American nation. The General's mundane name, 'John A.B.C. Smith,' clearly marks him as an everyman. As a General, he is also a direct representative of state power. If the disabled body of the General is understood as a body politic and privileged metaphor for America, a bleak picture emerges. The General reads his own body as a product of both the barbarism of the colonized and the inventiveness of colonizers. Critics of the story have, however, read it as emblematic of the violent and dehumanizing racial politics of nineteenth-century America. For instance, Joan Dayan has shown that the General's reliance on Pompey highlights the extent to which the formation of nation was related to and dependent on both the violent subjugation of native Indians and the labour of enslaved Africans. It is thus fitting that General A.B.C. Smith's body is not aligned with a conglomerate body made up of individual citizens bound together by their commitment to the common good. It is instead a fractured and dependent body, some parts of it destroyed by the violence of conquest, others gathered up and installed by slave labour.

Interestingly, the General's conversation counters, or at least attempts to counter, the messages about America communicated by his body. The General's volubility on the theme of progress contrasts the social silence surrounding his disability. While his injuries express the aftermath of colonial violence and the dependencies of slavery and of capitalism, the General's speech celebrates the innovations of

---

<sup>3</sup> It is also possible to see the tale as an expression of more narrow anxieties about corporations. The decades preceding the publication of this tale witnessed significant changes in the legal status of the incorporated business. Referred to as "artificial beings" by Chief Justice John Marshall, corporations were a contentious form of economic conglomeration (qtd. in Sellers, 87). Viewed by opponents as too powerful and as unnaturally immortal (because they were capable of outliving individual investors), corporations have a surprising amount in common with the General. Most obviously, his artificially restored public body is a corporation in the sense that it incorporates the labour and talents of various individuals. For more information on the controversy concerning corporations, see Bray Hammond's *Banks and Politics in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: 1957).

the age. The narrator notes the General's passion for progress and explains that "he delighted, especially, in commenting upon the rapid march of invention. Indeed, lead him where I would, this was a point to which he invariably came back" (130). The comments he makes on this theme are extensive and extravagant:

we are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age. Parachutes and rail-roads—man-traps and spring-guns! Our steam-boats are upon every sea, and the Nassau balloon packet is about to run regular trips (fare either way only twenty pounds sterling) between London and Timbuctoo. And who shall calculate the immense influence upon social life—upon arts—upon commerce—upon literature—which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electro-magnetics! Nor is this all, let me assure you! There is really no end to the march of invention. The most wonderful—the most ingenious— ... let me add, I say, the most *useful*—the most truly *useful* mechanical contrivances, are daily springing up like mushrooms, if I may so express myself, or, more figuratively, like—ah—grasshoppers, like grasshoppers ... about us and ah—ah—ah— around us! (130)

Targeting a selection of recent inventions, the General emphasizes the extent to which innovation affects an entire society, transforming not only its commerce but also its cultural and social life. Fittingly, his speech echoes the language of advertising; piling up adjectives, quoting prices and using repetition for emphasis, he is a salesman of the age. His panegyric to progress is, however, far from convincing. His celebration of weaponry, of "man-traps" and "spring-guns," as the pinnacle of modern technology, links innovation with injury and violence. This link is reinforced by the comparison of "mechanical contrivances" to grasshoppers, insects associated with consumption rather than production and with the devastation of agricultural resources. In short, his conversation, not unlike his body, communicates a range of conflicting messages about nineteenth-century America: it documents the accomplishments of the age while simultaneously revealing the price of progress.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Poe's commentary on progress can also be understood in terms of his sometimes troubled relationship with literary innovation and changing public taste. Poe was conscious of consumer trends and, as David Reynolds and others have noted, he was eager "to exploit the new market for sensational literature" (qtd. in Reynolds 231). Although aware of the connection between innovation and commercial success, Poe was not always able to profit from market trends. In the years immediately following the completion of "The Man that Was Used Up," he criticized "the onward and tumultuous spirit of the age" and attributed various publishing failures to an inability to keep up with "the rush of the age" (qtd. in Reynolds 231). Comments such as these share common ground with the critique of the "rapid march of mechanical invention" offered up in this short story. Poe's decision to express his scepticism about both innovations and new markets by producing an innovative tale targeting a new market is, however, like the tale itself, both surprising and revealing.

Published twenty years before the outbreak of the Civil War, Poe's story proved prophetic. Faced with the challenges of rehabilitating and reintegrating thousands of war amputees, post-bellum America made significant advancements in the design and manufacture of artificial limbs. As Lisa Herschbach and Erin O'Connor have shown, the makers of these limbs also developed elaborate strategies for marketing their products to amputees. Poe's story anticipates both of these developments, accurately envisioning the commercialism, technological character, and normalizing goals of post-bellum America's response to disabled war veterans.

An ability to foresee social responses to disability does not preclude Poe from participating in them. Although far from conventional, Poe's story is typical of nineteenth-century American literature's use of the disabled body as symbol. Canonical texts such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand" (1851), together with more minor works, such as Silas Weir Mitchell's "The Case of George Dedlow" (1866), demonstrate widespread interest in the disabled body. They also demonstrate disability's symbolic potential. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson examines disability in American culture and argues, "constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about vulnerability, control and identity" (6). In *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder go so far as to claim that literature has come to depend on disability. "Disability has," they argue, "been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for representational power, disruptive potential and analytical insight" (49).

Poe's story, a case study in American literature's employment and deployment of disability, exemplifies Mitchell and Snyder's vision of disability as cultural crutch. In Poe's "The Man that Was Used Up," disability serves a prosthetic function. Pairing progress with prosthesis and the building of a nation with amputation, this tale imagines disability, using it as a malleable symbol, and, in the process, evacuating the disabled body of any kind of essential value or meaning. The result is a story that, like the society it portrays, and the culture in which it was produced, elides the lived experiences of disabled people, but, ironically, relies on artificial limbs and organs as much, if not more, than the disabled war veteran around whom it is centred.

Vanessa Warne  
University of Manitoba  
Canada

## Works Cited

- Benesch, Klaus. "Do Machines Make History? Technological Determinism in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man that Was Used Up.'" *Re-Visioning the Past: Historical Self-Reflexivity in American Short Fiction*. Eds. Bernd Engler and Oliver Scheiding. Trier: WVT, 1998. 107-120.
- Dayan, Joan. "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies and Slaves." *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995. 179-209.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Poe, Persons and Property." *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*. Ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Herschbach, Lisa. "Prosthetic Reconstruction: Making the Industry, Re-Making the Body, Modelling the Nation." *History Workshop Journal* 44 (1997): 23-57.
- Hoffman, Daniel. *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Leverenz, David. "Spanking the Master: Mind-Body Crossings in Poe's Sensationalism." *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. J. Gerald Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 95-128.
- Mead, Joan Tyler. "Poe's 'The Man that Was Used Up': Another Bugaboo Campaign." *Studies in Short Fiction* 23.3 (1986): 281-286.
- Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000.
- O'Connor, Erin. *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Man that Was Used Up." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. Toronto: Penguin Classics, 1986. 127-137.
- Pry, Elmer. "A Folklore Source for 'The Man that Was Used Up.'" *Poe Studies* 8.2 (1975): 46.
- Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Sellers, Charles. *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- Whipple, William. "Poe's Political Satire." *University of Texas Studies in English*, 35 (1956): 81-95.