Abstract

This project explores the role of disease in narratives of female development throughout the nineteenth century, primarily British women’s novels. Specifically, I analyze the ways in which female subjectivities are formed in a relationship with illness, experienced either personally or by proxy. Bringing novels and memoirs in dialogue with gendered representations detailed in Romantic and Victorian medical treatises, I propose that certain diseases were uniquely adaptable to particular narrative paths, and that the course of a female character’s growth depended on the nature of her pathology. In doing so, I reveal that the realms of medical discourse and the narrative arts were inextricably bound throughout the nineteenth century and that they collaborated in constructing Victorian femininities such as “the rational woman,” “the angel in the house,” and the New Woman. It is my conclusion that gendered representations of illness produced by biomedical discourse inform both the crystallization of subjectivity and configuration of narrative structure in the woman’s bildung.