

## **Treatment of Disability in Wilkie Collins's Major Novels**

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The subject of 'disability' has always become an awkward and unsure one. The trouble, perhaps, is caused primarily by a sense of discomfort regarding the 'proper' emotional response towards the 'disabled' people. Generally, it is a confused feeling of compassion, anxiety, apprehension, pity, annoyance, detachment, self-complacency and even guilt. Moreover, the borderline between 'ability' and 'disability' remains vulnerable and indefinite; as nobody can assure that the 'able-bodied' people will remain so till their death. It creates another uncomfortable realisation about the impermanence of body and instability of mind. In fact, the attitude to disability is a cultural construct. The emotional reaction to it is closely associated with the accepted standard of physical as well as mental ability.

The novels of Wilkie Collins (1824 – 1889) repeatedly foreground some characters that are 'challenged' in respect of their functioning in, and their relationship to the world around them. Collins, one of the most popular and prolific novelists of the nineteenth century, is widely recognised among the exponents of the sensation novels and among the pioneers of modern English detective fiction. The current trends of Collins criticism, however, do not consider the author as a mere 'sensationalist', rather thoroughly explore the complexity of his narrative pattern and highlights the radical and subversive elements of his literary creation. This paper proposes to explore the representation of 'disability' (both physical and mental) in Collins's major novels written in the 1860s. It also attempts to find out the ways in which Collins questions the process of constructing the Victorian idea of 'disability'.

Martha Stoddard Holmes mentions in her *Fiction of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* that our response to physical disability is “a product of those dominant cultural narratives—fictional and otherwise—that teach us what embodiment means, when it is desirable and when it is harmful” (Holmes ix). She contends that these narratives represent disability as “alien, terrifying, tragic” and also convey the sense that “it is normal to feel horrified, relieved and inspired, all from a safe distance, when we encounter disability” (ix). This ‘distanced’ perspective forms the basis of a ‘disabled’ person’s social marginality. On the other hand, Holmes continues, the habit to describe physical impairment in emotional terms tend to obscure some other important registers such as the scientific, environmental, economic, political, sexual, artistic, geographic and so on (3). For example, whether ‘disability’ is caused by disease, poor nutrition, injury, accident, violence, genetic ‘disorder’ or anything else is overshadowed by the ‘feelings’ towards the ‘disabled’. This is specifically true in respect of Victorian attitude to ‘disability’.

The British nineteenth century is regarded as a period of sensation and melodrama. Excessive emotional reaction to ‘disabled’ ones often tended to become melodramatic. Sometimes it was also subject to manipulations on the part of the ‘disabled’ people. This is reflected in Henry Mayhew’s encyclopaedic *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2). Andrew Halliday presents here a vivid picture of the numerous kinds of physical disability that could be found frequently on the streets of the city in the mid-nineteenth century. It reveals that many of them were imposters. A considerable number of ‘beggars’ “exhibited” their impaired bodies as their sources of income (431). Those who used their ‘disability’ and ‘deformity’ seemed to dwell on a different sphere of life and experiences.

Critics and biographers have attempted to explain Collins’s interest in physical disability as a manifestation of his own experiences with chronic illness. Referring to Catherine Peter’s biography of Wilkie Collins, Kate Flint suggests that Collins’s interest in “obstacles to full physical functioning”, may be seen partly as a result of his own eyesight-related problems (he suffered from chronic ‘eye gout’ and consulted the ophthalmic surgeon George Crichtett about this) (Flint 153). Collins’s reliance on melodramatic tradition has also been suggested as a reason for his interest in physical disability. On the other hand, Flint refers to a broader nineteenth-century concern “with the operation of the senses” in this respect (Flint 154). In her observation, this concern was demonstrated in various fields such as literature and science of the

period. Contemporary scientific works that studied and made various developments in the fields of physiology and psychology paid attention to “variation and aberration within human perceptual systems”. There was an attempt to make generalisations about the ‘normal’ functioning of the senses (154). This attitude was duly mirrored in the representation of ‘disabled’ characters in the contemporary English novels. For example, we may mention the diminutive persons of The Marchioness in Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864); the deformed female artist in Dinah Craik’s *Olive* (1850); Ermine Williams in *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) and Geraldine Underwood in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Pillars of the House* (1873). All these figures are typically portrayed as innocent, somber and tragic. At the same time, male disabilities are found in the characters like the hunchbacked Philip Wakem in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Colin in Francis Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911). Physical impairment made both of them highly sensitive and in a way, frustrated. A happy exception is, in this respect, the cheerful Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens.

Collins’s portrayal of ‘physical disability’ shows, however, a departure from this tradition. He draws our attention to a very significant aspect of ‘disability’ in literature: the matter of representation. Collins’s portrayal of the ‘physically challenged’ persons not only makes us aware of their impairment, but questions the stability of the evidence of the senses. This is noticed both in his popular novels of the 1860s and in the lesser known novels. For example, we may mention the deaf and dumb heroine Mary (‘Madonna’) in *Hide and Seek* (1854), the visually impaired Leonard Franklin in *The Dead Secret* (1857) and Lucilla Finch of *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), Miserrimus Dexter who lacks his lower limbs in *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and others.

Before exploring the representation of the ‘disabled’ characters in Collins’s novels published in the 1860s, Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s comment in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) must be mentioned. Thomson claims here that her intention is to challenge the conventional assumptions that ‘able-bodiedness’ and its conceptual opposite, ‘disability’ are self-evident physical conditions. She argues that the ‘physically disabled’ are the products of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives, comprising an exclusionary discourse. To Thompson, disability is “a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions” (6).

In Wilkie Collins's works, one may notice the anticipation of Thomson's view, as his representation of the 'disabled' persons interrogates the terms in which disabilities are interpreted. Although the employment of external observation concerning the formation of disability is maintained, his dominant interest lies not so much in physical impairment, but in its psychological effects. His characters display emotions which are similarly experienced by both able-bodied and disabled. In fact, 'normalcy' and 'disability' are parts of "the same system", as Lennard J. Davies has suggested in his *Enforcing Normalcy* (Davies 2).

However, in Collins's novels there is no clear line of distinction between the normal and the 'abnormal'. Rosanna Spearman, in *The Moonstone* (1868), is never treated by the author 'differently' because of her deformity. Rather, the novel focuses on her strength as a human being, and thus, on her similarity to the 'able-bodied' people around her. Rosanna is a housemaid with badly deformed shoulders: "she was the plainest woman in the house, with the additional misfortune of having one shoulder bigger than the other" (*The Moonstone* 28). The girl has poor health too; she suffers from occasional 'fainting fits'. In spite of all these, the novel highlights her 'ladylike' qualities, which create a stronger impact on the readers. Rosanna's friend, the fisherman's daughter 'Limping Lucy' is another character with physical deformity in *The Moonstone*. Lucy is a skinny girl with a misshapen foot and a fierce temper. According to Betteredge, Lucy's greatest misfortune is the 'crutch' that she is compelled to use because of her deformity. Yet, the character of Lucy is striking not for her lameness, but for her passionate love and devotion to Rosanna. Significantly, the 'disabilities' of these two women are intrinsic to their working-class existence. In the novel, the reader notices an effort on their part to move past the physical and social limitations imposed upon them.

On the other hand, two 'upper-class' gentlemen, who dwell on the borderline between the able-bodied and the impaired, display their difficulties in a different way in two other novels of Collins. They are the hypersensitive Frederick Fairlie in *The Woman in White* (1859), and the constitutionally weak Noel Vanstone in *No Name* (1862). Both manifest 'deformities' which make them especially sensitive, and at the same time, peevish. Mr. Fairlie, with his 'vulnerable' body and 'wretched state of nerves', is a self-professed invalid. Even a regular conversation seems too harsh to be tolerated by him. Hartright truly suspects that "Mr Fairlie's selfish affectation and Mr Fairlie's wretched nerves meant one and the same thing" (31). His over-refined artistic

sensibility has turned into a caricature that covers the self-indulgent, idle, irresponsible person. In fact, Mr. Fairlie turns the house into the private asylum for himself.

Noel Vanstone in *No Name* manifests almost similar sensibilities. Just like Mr. Fairlie, Noel's 'delicate' health is paired with his 'refined' habits. Magdalen notices him to have a plate of strawberries on his lap, "with a napkin to preserve the purity of his white dressing gown" (*No Name* 281). Noel Vanstone is too lazy and incompetent to do anything. Even he is reluctant to open his eyes fully; he looks at everything with half-closed eyes. It is not surprising that this man of thirty-five allows himself to be treated as a child. Yet, this child-like dependence on others does not express his innocence; it points towards Noel Vanstone's self-indulgence. Noel's insensitivity and miserly nature is reflected in his attitude to the unfortunate Vanstone sisters – Norah and Magdalen.

Thus, the conventional traits of physical disability are subverted in Collins's novels. The 'disabled' people are presented by the novelist as similar to any 'normal' human beings. The readers are made to feel in their own way about these characters, irrespective of their physical or mental 'normalcy'. Flint argues that, the "conditions of disablement are evoked in ways which make able-bodied readers reflect on the workings of their own senses, and their deficiencies, as well as their powers" (Flint 165).

'Mental disability' is another striking feature that plays a vital role in Wilkie Collins's novels. Here, the term 'mental disability' is deliberately used as the novels portray some characters occupying an indefinite space between 'sanity' and 'insanity'. Interestingly, in Collins's novels there is no instance of absolute craziness. Here, too, he offers a critique of the accepted standard of 'normalcy'. Before analysing Collins's treatment of these figures, we need to have a glimpse of the nineteenth-century concept of sanity and insanity. 'Insanity' was one of the major problematic issues in the Victorian period. Madness in the period was considered to be the result of various aspects: inheritance of "bad blood or the wandering wombs of 'hysterical' women", "alcoholism, novel reading, excessive abstinence, and sexual desire" (Purchase 93). Purchase rightly observes that the Victorians viewed the mentally 'ill' people as a threat that must be 'housed' and 'controlled' for maintaining order in the society (93). It is evident in the remark of the perplexed Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White*, after his sensational meeting with the 'mad' Anne Catherick in a lonely London Road:

What Had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man's duty, mercifully to control? (*The Woman in White* 22)

Referring to James Cowles Pritchard's *Treatise on Insanity* (1835), Purchase informs that madness in the Victorian period was considered to be the offspring of a corrupt 'morality' rather than any damage to 'intellectual faculties'. Athena Vrettos in her essay "Victorian Psychology" also points out that, as nineteenth-century parenting manuals instructed parents "in the careful moral management of their children"; the same techniques were increasingly used to treat lunatic patients (75). One may suggest that Victorian 'sanity' is broadly associated with the glorification of contemporary ideas of 'rationality' and 'civilisation'. Foucault in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1967) has also suggested that madness and rationality are mutually dependent categories. Foucault mentions in his book, the ways in which "the discourse of moral management operated as a means of social control through the early part of the nineteenth century" (Taylor 30). There are various representations of insanity in Victorian novel. While Catherine Earnshaw in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) manifest partial disintegration of mind, Bertha Mason on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) represents violent female insanity. Lewis Carroll's 'Alice tales' celebrate the pleasures of 'madness' in a 'childish' topsy-turvy world of fantasy. Lady Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* also turns out to be 'insane' since deviant women in the nineteenth century were traditionally stamped as either 'bad' or 'mad'.

Wilkie Collins's portrayal of 'abnormal' characters (especially women) in the novels of the 1860s contradicts the dominant nineteenth-century trend of representing deviant and highly energetic madwomen. His 'mentally disabled' women are rather passive, and 'controlled'. For example, Anne Catherick, the mysterious 'woman in white' dwells outside the border of 'normal' social behaviour. Yet she seems to be "quiet and self-controlled" in Hartright's view. To him, she is either "naturally flighty or unsettled", or some "recent shock of terror" has disturbed the balance of her faculties. He admits:

But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had, I can honestly declare, never occurred to me, in connection with her. (*The Woman in White* 22)

In fact, Anne's 'insanity' is a problematic issue in the novel. There are ambiguities regarding the nature of her 'abnormal' behaviour. She is described to be the result of her father's moral weakness and excesses of passion. It reflects the common Victorian idea that madness is the result of moral deviance. On the other hand, as Jenny Bourne Taylor observes in *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, Anne represents monomania or partial insanity (Taylor 106). 'Monomania' was regarded as a form of partial insanity in which the person seemed to be 'normal' in all spaces of behaviour except one. Thus, the portrayal of Anne confuses the traditional views of insanity. It also shows how a person's social identity is formed by a set standard of perception which is usually determined by social and sexual hierarchies of the period. It reveals how feminine identity is particularly subject to masculine manipulation. Count Fosco and Sir Percival have primarily constructed Anne's identity as an 'insane' woman, which they later impose on Laura, robbing Laura off her former social and financial identity. It also shows how the change of situation and experience turns a respectable upper-class lady into a 'mad' marginalised woman.

Matilda Wragge in *No Name*, also belongs to the boundary of 'normal' and 'abnormal' with her slow mental process and below average intelligence. To Captain Wragge, her husband, Matilda is "a little slow. Constitutionally torpid" (*No Name* 203). She is a perfect mismatch for Captain Wragge: entirely unable to cheat anybody, and equally unfit to understand the 'normal' ways of life. Mrs. Wragge's deformity is primarily caused by the discrepancy between her "disproportionately large" figure (265) and "constitutionally torpid" faculty of mind. A gigantic woman of six feet and three inches beside the diminutive Captain, Matilda Wragge suggests a disruption in traditional masculine-feminine pairing. Yet, Mrs Wragge's relationship with her husband is exactly like that of servant to her master. Like Anne, Matilda's 'disability' is also subject to masculine control. Like a 'well trained' child (or even an animal), Matilda behaves according to her husband's whims and presents herself before him for his inspection. There is always a curious 'buzzing' inside her head in a moment of confusion. This is the only revolt of Matilda's 'disabled' brain against the 'smart' and 'fast' world around her. Being always instructed what to do and how to do; she has apparently lost the faculty of thinking independently.

Barickman argues that Mrs. Wragge's "failings" are not only presented as "abnormalities", but as confusion between the conventional ideal of femininity and wifely duty (Barickman 124). While feminine beauty is traditionally equated with physical delicacy and softness (Collins's conventional heroines such as Laura Fairlie and Norah Vanstone represent this concept), duties of an ideal wife require rigorous activity and servitude which can spoil that vulnerable softness. So, it is impossible for a dutiful wife to maintain ladylike beauty. This problem is further intensified when Captain Wragge orders an omlette for his breakfast. The 'cookery book' creates a great confusion in Mrs. Wragge's mind as it requires butter of "the size of your thumb into the frying-pan" (*No Name* 207). Her thumb is, naturally, too large to measure the right amount of butter. The writer of the cookery book does not consider individual differences of size while giving instructions. It assumes that all women fit the same physical frame, just as all people are judged by the same standard in the society. Mrs. Wragge's passivity and withdrawal from 'meaningful' activities reflects the miseries of all the dutiful women in marriage. One may notice that Collins equates 'mental disability' with feminine passivity involved in marriage through Matilda Wragge.

Thus, in Collins's fiction, 'ability' and 'disability', the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' are not represented as completely distinct from one another. Rather, the line of demarcation between the two is made vulnerable. Flint truly contends that Collins makes his readers enter into the world of "the differently-abled", rejecting the "the kind of distancing and categorisation" employed by the conventional society (Flint 165). Through these characters, Wilkie Collins conveys to his readers a need to question the grounds on which the concept of ability is constructed.

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