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**DISABILITY IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
SENSATION FICTION**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English**

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ABSTRACT.

This thesis investigates representations of physical and mental disability in selected fictional works by the Victorian sensation novelists Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Various chapters examine Collins's *Hide and Seek* (1854), *The Dead Secret* (1857), *Poor Miss Finch* (1871-2), and *The Law and the Lady* (1875), and Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent* (1860-1) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-2). I pay particular attention to disabled characters represented by Collins and Braddon, examining how aspects of their sensory functioning, cognitive disabilities, or difficulties with mobility are depicted. I consider how these novels responded to previous traditions of representing disability in literature, yet comprised a significant advance on them. Bearing in mind the novels' historical context, including how they respond to developments in Victorian science and to shifting tendencies in the Victorian view of disability, I also apply the insights of modern-day theorists in Disability Studies. Thus, I emphasise how Collins and Braddon parallel physical and mental disability and culturally-induced forms of disability, and how they seek to undermine social and medical certainties about disability categorizations. These aspects of their work foreshadow the trend in modern Disability Studies to theorize disability as a social construction rather than as a defect or impairment. The novels I consider here seriously scrutinize the 'medical' model of disability that prevailed during the nineteenth century.

A secondary objective of my thesis is to give scholarly attention to novels by Collins and Braddon that have not been sufficiently analysed by critics. It is in some of his apparently 'minor' novels that Collins provides his most complex commentaries on forms of disability. Similarly, academic study of Braddon's work has tended to focus on *Lady Audley's Secret*, while ignoring her remarkable representation of a mute man in *The Trail of the Serpent*. All of the novels I discuss were published within the period of 1854 to 1875, and their overwhelming tendency, unlike that of most mid-Victorian novels, is to empower their characters who have disabilities rather than to regard them as requiring pity.

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DISABILITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SENSATION FICTION

GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

The Novels in this thesis.

This thesis takes for its subject the representation of disabled characters in some works by the Victorian sensation novelists Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. While my thesis is titled “Disability in Nineteenth-Century Sensation Fiction”, I concentrate on works by these two authors because they are commonly regarded as the most accomplished and influential of the sensation novelists, and were also the two most popular. More importantly, Collins and Braddon were by some margin the sensation authors who displayed the most interest in creating fictional representations of physical and mental disability, and their novels often challenge or interrogate contemporary knowledge about and attitudes to disability. In fact, I shall argue that the progressive elements of their representations of physical and mental disability and their recognition that ‘disability’ is not merely a material fact but is a concept that is also created by social factors and by medical and psychiatric discourse, lead Collins and Braddon to prefigure many of the theories and claims of modern-day Disability Theory.

Between the works of Collins and Braddon there are discernible thematic and stylistic influences and textual interactions. The two writers were friends, and Braddon openly referred to Collins as one of her literary mentors. Recent scholarship has broadened our idea of the sensation fiction genre, but within this wide field their interests match most closely. Yet, comparison of their works also reveals interesting differences in how they responded to issues related to scientific and medical knowledge, and their understandings of the concept of ‘disability’.

Of the two, Wilkie Collins displays the more consistent interest in disability and the more radical approach to its representation. Additionally, some elements of Braddon’s writing seem dependent on the examples set by Collins. For this reason, about two-thirds of my thesis will focus on how Collins wrote about disability, with the other third focused on Braddon. However, I do not regard Braddon as a mere satellite of Collins or as an imitator of his style or subject matter. Braddon was an accomplished author who possessed her own personal insights into both physical disability and insanity.

I have chosen to limit my investigation of the works of Collins to a few core texts, and my focus is on works historically perceived as among Collins's 'minor' novels. Critical interest in Collins has steadily grown in the last twenty to thirty years, and he is now considered by some to be a 'major' Victorian novelist. However, although Collins's reputation as novelist has risen dramatically, critical attention has most frequently focused on a narrow portion of his output, notably on what critical opinion has nominated his four 'big' novels: *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone*, *No Name*, and *Armada*. I have decided to avoid writing on these four novels, partly to avoid continuing the disproportionate focus on them, but also because some critics have already examined representations of disability in these novels. More pressing and positive reasons for my focus on Collins's 'minor' novels *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret*, *Poor Miss Finch*, and *The Law and the Lady* are my desire to provide these excellent novels with the critical attention they deserve, and my discovery that it is within some of these lesser known works that Collins provides his most innovative and provocative insights into cultural ideas surrounding disability and into the actual experience of disability.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon has not shared quite the same degree of cultural favour and rehabilitation as has Collins; most of her works are still accorded 'minor' status. One exception to this is Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, which has acquired a kind of 'cult' status as a superior example of Victorian 'alternative' or 'popular' literature. There may even be some basis for arguing that, like Collins's *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley's Secret* has moved into the Victorian literary canon. In this thesis, I do examine *Lady Audley's Secret*, since this novel delivers Braddon's most celebrated and concerted look at issues of insanity, but I also study one of Braddon's more obscure works, her first novel *The Trail of the Serpent*. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon, like Collins, makes many unusual observations about the 'constructed' nature of nineteenth-century concepts of insanity. My discussion of *The Trail of the Serpent* will elucidate how this novel's depiction of moral insanity bears many parallels with Braddon's later depiction of such in *Lady Audley's Secret*. The parallels between the two novels have not been remarked upon by previous critics. *The Trail of the Serpent* may be even more interesting due to the evidence it presents that Braddon was also very capable of creating vivid and sympathetic portrayals of characters with physical disabilities.

Most of the novels discussed in this thesis did not meet with critical favour within their own time, partly because of their focus on disease and forms of disability, and partly

because of subversive elements in their portrayal of women. Many of these novels feature unusually assertive women, and they often make correlations between the stigmas suffered by characters with physical and mental disabilities, and the inferior subject positions accorded to women. So, while my major focus within this thesis is on how Collins and Braddon represent disabled identities, gender roles and gender performance will also be discussed; these issues are inextricable from Collins's and Braddon's representations of disability.

In the remainder of this "General Introduction" I shall focus on introducing the important theoretical concepts that inform my study, and on providing some contextual background for this thesis, which is both an examination of certain aspects of Victorian sensation novels and an investigation of Victorian representations of disability that draws heavily from modern-day theories of disability. I shall provide an introductory discussion of many of the most important concerns of disability studies. I shall also discuss discoveries and theories of importance in mid-nineteenth century science, focusing specifically on the scientific knowledge most pertinent to Collins and Braddon's depictions of disability. I shall also discuss some of the typical features of representations of characters with disabilities that appeared in Victorian novels that were classified as mainstream rather than as sensation fiction. I will also, briefly, delineate some of the ways in which sensation novels differed from such previous or contemporaneous representations. These discussions will provide a historical and literary context for interpreting these sensation novels and will explain why my thesis shall focus on particular issues of representation.

Introduction to Disability and Disability Studies.

In the last two or three decades, disability studies has emerged as a recognizable and important field of socially-based theory. Perhaps one of the best explanations of what disability studies is and how it operates is provided by this commentary that appears in Chapter One of Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), one of the earliest and most influential texts in disability studies:

Although much recent scholarship explores how difference and identity operate in such politicized constructions as gender, race, and sexuality, cultural and literary criticism has generally overlooked the related perceptions of corporeal otherness we think of variously as "monstrosity," "mutilation," "deformation," "crippledness," or "physical disability".

... My purpose here is to alter the terms and expand our understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing “disability” as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

... By scrutinizing the disabled figure as the paradigm of what culture calls deviant, I hope to expose the assumptions that support seemingly neutral norms (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 5-6).

Thomson, rather than view physical disability as a medical problem, theorizes that disability is not so much a property of the body, as a social construction. It is a product of social assumptions and beliefs about what ‘normal’ bodies are supposed to be and do. Rather than accept the historically prevailing view of disability as a medical problem, Thomson instead reframes disability in the light of a new “minority discourse” about disability, a discourse that rejects oppressive narratives about disability, including the idea that it is a personal tragedy (see Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, back matter).

One aspect of disability studies is the interaction between disability and literature, and the examination of how disability has been represented in (western) literature. It might be expected that, like some other groups of people who have been marginalized, disabled people are not frequently represented in literature. However, recent disability scholars who have perused literature from the last few centuries, plus contemporary literature, have actually concluded that this is *not* the case. Instead, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, in their book *Narrative Prosthesis* (and in Mitchell’s article of a similar name), have suggested that the problem with the representation of disability in literature is not that disability has been ignored or under-represented. The disabled have not simply been elided from literary representation in the same way that has occurred with “many other minority identities”. Instead, despite the fact that “images of disability abound in literary history”, in the media, and in “discourses outside medicine and the other hard sciences”, disability “disappears” even when right in front of our noses. It appears Mitchell and Snyder attribute this to the fact that disability has often been represented in oblique ways; in ways that do not consider everyday material facets of disability, but that instead often use disability as metaphor. Either despite such representations, or perhaps due to them, disability gets “screened out of our imaginations”, and disabled people become socially invisible:

This question is not simply a matter of stereotypes or “bad objects,” to borrow Naomi Schor’s phrase.¹ Rather the representation of disability strikes at the very core of cultural definitions and values (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor”, 19).

It is important to note, however, this concept of “bad objects”. Apart from the idea that disability tends to “disappear” despite its literary and social presence, the fact remains that throughout history various negative representations of the disabled have abounded in literature, and this fact has been (and remains) a concern of some disability theorists who have aimed to counter misleading or negatively stereotyped portrayals of disabled people, or to at least point out their effect. When literature has represented characters with disabilities, it has often shied away from doing so in vivid, concrete, or physically or psychologically realistic ways. In many cases, the disabled character is presented through a lens of moral judgements: they are presented as being punished for a moral deficiency or their disability reveals that deficiency; they are presented as grotesque, or their representation goes to another extreme, representing their disability as tragic and using it to elicit great pathos.

Mitchell and Snyder’s work on *Narrative Prosthesis* is very useful to the development of disability studies, due to its thorough examination of how literary texts tend to make use of disabled characters. *Narrative Prosthesis* rightly points out that there is more to analysing representations of disability than deciding only whether a representation is ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. However, the attitudes present behind representations of disabled people are still a major concern of disability studies. Moreover, despite the commonality of representations of disability in literature – pointed out by Mitchell and Snyder - it could be argued that disabled people are still under-represented in literature; it is also true that at different periods of time, the disabled have definitely been shunned as “bad objects”, as unsuitable to appear in literary works. Even when represented, the disabled may still be considered as “bad objects” by readers. Some scholars of disability have surmised that the reluctance to incorporate realistic depictions of disabled characters in narratives reflects mainstream literature’s tendency to focus on verisimilitude and “realism”. Such a focus leads to a preoccupation with representing characters who occupy the “medium” ground. Mainstream literature’s tendency to focus on the “everyman” does not leave much room for the disabled, who are thought to be non-normative and non-representative (see Davis, “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve,

¹ See Mitchell’s note 5, corresponding to page 19 of “Narrative Prosthesis”. Mitchell does not make it completely apparent which work he is referring to by Schor, but it appears to be *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular*.

and Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body”). During the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, literature was dominated by the “realist” novel and “domestic” novel. Although disabled characters do appear with frequency in nineteenth-century literature, it could be argued that they do not do so as often as could be expected – perhaps, as Mitchell suggests, writers assumed that most readers were able-bodied, or were concerned with creating characters whom able-bodied readers would identify with.

Therefore, there are a number of major issues that disability studies tries to address: the tendency for people with disabilities to be ignored in literature and by the media; the way that people with disabilities, when represented, are often represented negatively, or in ways that are misleading and unhelpful – that perpetuate myths about disability; and lastly, that the disabled often escape our conscious notice, even when represented.

Two important concepts that emerged in cultural theory during the 1980s and 1990s are highly relevant to the study of disability theory: the first, as I have mentioned, is the “bad object”; the second is “abjection”. Feminist critic Naomi Schor theorized the “bad object” in the 1990s. While Schor’s idea of the “bad object” does not refer specifically to persons with disabilities, this concept can be put to use in disability theory, as “a bad object is a discursive object that has been ruled out of bounds by the prevailing academic politics of the day or one that represents a ‘critical perversion’” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 19; Mitchell appears to be quoting from the “Preface” to Schor’s *Bad Objects*, xv). David Mitchell suggests that until the mid-1990s, people with disabilities were regarded as just such objects, and that this was reflected by the fact that disability was “almost entirely neglected by literary criticism in general, until the development, in the mid-1990s, of disability studies in the humanities.” In his article “Narrative Prosthesis”, written in 2002, several years after the advent of disability studies, Mitchell notes that disability “still strikes many as a perverse interest for academic contemplation” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 19).

Other disability scholars have recounted their experiences of encountering suggestions that disability studies should not be accorded attention because it is “irrelevant”, or a “minority interest”, or a “perverse” subject to examine. One, Tobin Siebers, notes that those scholars and media outlets that have attacked disability studies paint it as being narcissistic, self-righteous, or hyper-individualistic (Siebers, “Tender Organs, Narcissism, and Identity Politics”, 40-41). He explains that those who attack disability studies even try to pathologize disabled disability scholars and other disabled people simply for drawing attention to the fact that they have a disability. Siebers concludes that such

criticisms of disability studies occur because society has a “preference for general over individual experience” (Siebers, 42).

This negative response toward disability studies probably should be recognized as simply a continuation of the pathologization and stigmatization of the physically and mentally disabled throughout history. As Tobin Siebers explains, some of the “blame” for the social tendency to regard the disabled through a lens of pathology can be laid at the feet of Sigmund Freud. Early in his career Freud published a study in which he suggested that disabled people were very likely to be narcissistic: their pain or discomfort would make them unlikely to think about the outside world; they would think only about themselves (Siebers, 43).² Siebers notes that psychoanalytic therapists and medical practitioners have perpetuated this tendency to see the physically disabled as inherently mentally pathological or inclined toward mental pathology. According to him, psychoanalysts are often encouraged to believe that “physical anomalies” will necessarily lead to “compensatory narcissistic self-inflation” (see William Niederland, “Narcissistic Ego Impairment in Patients with Early Physical Malformations”, 519, and 522; qtd. in Siebers, 45) or instead influence the disabled person to become isolated and withdrawn (Siebers, 47). Psychoanalysts often express a belief that any mental pathology a disabled person develops is likely to remain entrenched and unfixable (Siebers, 45).

We can see from such psychoanalytic responses to disability and from past literary representations of it that disability has frequently been positioned as something ‘other’, ‘alien’, ‘different’ – certainly as something that need not concern ‘normative’ individuals in society, apart from the tasks involved with keeping the physically or mentally disabled at a safe remove. I suggest that the modern public’s tendency to think of disability studies as only a ‘minority’ interest perpetuates the stigmatization of the disabled and the aura of pathology that seems to surround disability.

Certainly, some disability studies scholars envisage disability studies as a kind of theory or movement that stands up for the rights of a ‘minority’ group, and write their studies accordingly. However, this approach is adopted in order to stand up for the rights of disabled people, not to suggest their unimportance or that they should be segregated from others. Meanwhile, even though some scholars adopt this ‘minority’ model of disability, it has also been argued convincingly that disability studies should not be regarded as a minority interest at all. As one of the leading disability scholars, Martha

² Rosemarie Garland Thomson also mentions Freud’s influence in this regard, discussing his essay “The Exceptions”, which “labels disabled people psychologically pathological” (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 37).

Stoddard Holmes, has suggested, disability studies and the rights accorded to those with disabilities should be considered of importance to everyone, because every person in the world has a body and anyone has the potential to become disabled:

From a purely utilitarian standpoint, it will be an unusual person who does not have an experience of disability in his or her life, either personally or contiguously, as a family member, friend, or loved one of a person with disabilities (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 195).

Another scholar, Ruth Beinstock Anolik, has pointed out more recently that “the health/pathology binary” is in itself illogical and artificial. She suggests that instead of thinking in terms of concepts such as “disability” and “ability”, or being “disabled” or “able-bodied”, it might be more accurate and constructive to think in terms of people having a “TAB” – that is, a “Temporarily Abled-Body”. Anolik explains that this term is used by some activists within the disability rights movement and scholars within disability studies, and that it

connotes that the abled body might, at any random moment, become disabled. This notion interrogates the rigid binaries of abled/disabled and health/pathology and replaces it with a new paradigm: the spectrum of ability, in which each person occupies a random and temporary position (Anolik, “Introduction: Diagnosing Demons”, *Demons of the Body and Mind*, 5).

Anolik’s observations point toward another concern of disability studies: not only do some disability scholars question the privileging of, for example, hearing over deafness, but others even question Western society’s tendency to hold up the image of a ‘perfect’ body as an ideal, or even as being the ‘norm’. Anolik points out the absurdity of the idea of a perfect body: “in absolute terms, all bodies and minds are imperfect, and thus deviating in some way from the ideal norm; the binary thus collapses into itself” (Anolik, “Introduction”, 4).

The fact that disability has historically been regarded as a ‘bad object’ is closely related to ideas of the ‘abject’, and abjection is another important factor in how people respond to disabilities. Social beliefs that certain things are abject may be the main impetus for many people’s automatic inclinations to pathologize the disabled. The theory of abjection has been most thoroughly developed by the cultural theorist Julia Kristeva. According to Kristeva’s work, abject objects are those objects which disturb various systems and ideas of order or identity; things which do not appear to respect borders, positions, or rules. Things that are ‘abject’ may be very real or authentic experiences or objects, but because they are raw, unfiltered, and disquieting, they are shunned by

society or considered ‘taboo’. For example, corpses and faeces are abject: faeces are abject because they have been expelled from the body, while corpses are abject because they are no longer part of the society of the living. Abject objects may even be regarded with horror, or regarded as ‘evil’.³ The general purpose behind such ideas of “defilement” is to maintain social and natural boundaries (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 5).

Unfortunately, in our modern day, it is obvious that many racist, sexist, or homophobic ideologies position various marginalized groups as abject. Similarly, people with disabilities are often considered abject – possibly because it is thought that they cannot be fully assimilated into mainstream culture, or that the bodily or mental functioning of the disabled is embarrassing or disgusting. The result is that both physically and mentally disabled people are often stigmatized or avoided.

Importantly, many recent studies that have regarded literary works through the lens of disability theory have demonstrated convincingly that disability theory can be a useful tool for revealing insights about literary works that might not otherwise become apparent. Disability theory can be used to reclaim examples of the disabled body and mind in literature, to comment accurately upon how past representations of disability reflect the contemporaneous social and scientific beliefs of that time period, and also to suggest more positive and constructive ways of thinking about or representing disability in the future.

This thesis rejects the idea that disability studies is an unimportant field, or of only minority interest. Even if we are not personally affected by disability, issues related to disability may be regarded as of importance to any educated and ethical human being, simply on humanitarian grounds. Ensuring that people with disabilities are treated well, receive the assistance they may need, and are represented responsibly in the media, in film, in literature, in medical writings and in the law, is a human rights issue. Since disability studies is an interdisciplinary field and involves a wide range of opinions and thought about disability, I shall not be able to engage with every branch of disability theory in this thesis. However, I shall make particular reference to specific critics, all of whom are amongst the leading theorists in this field.

³ Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* is the major book on this subject. Kristeva notes that the abject “lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated”, and that it is a part of “a vortex of summons and repulsion”. Kristeva states that “the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1, 2).

One development of particular relevance to studying how literature represents disabled characters is David T. Mitchell and Sharon T. Snyder's recently developed theory of 'narrative prosthesis', a theory that points out the ways in which disabled characters have tended to be used in literature, while also investigating the fact that disabled characters, even though often present in literature, often seem to be overlooked by readers. Mitchell and Snyder point out that a surprising number of novels are closely structured around, or even dependent upon, one character having a disability - yet the centrality of this character or their disability is not always immediately apparent to the reader. Sometimes this is because narratives often treat the disabled character as a 'secondary' character, eliding their importance. Sometimes such characters are left underdeveloped by writers, or the story of the character with the disability is subordinate to the fates of more normative main characters. In a significant number of cases, the disabled character is used as a means to further a love plot between two main (and 'normative') characters.⁴ The disabled character, however, is not rewarded with similar happiness.

The presence of a disabled character or of a particular disability is also often used as a symbolic means of making an observation about society. Mitchell explains that within literature this "corporeal metaphor offers narrative the one thing it cannot possess – an anchor in materiality. Such a process embodies what I term the materiality of metaphor" (Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis", 28). One drawback of such usage is that it can, unfortunately, embed "the body in a limiting array of symbolic meanings" (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 28). In fact, it has become common for "the impaired body of the disabled person" to represent "the negative manifestations of that impairment in society" (see Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot*, 12; qtd. in Flint, "Disability and Difference", 163), a tendency which can encourage further stigmatization or oppression of the disabled.

Since "the able body" "poses as transparently average or normal", it really "has no definitional core" (Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis", 17). Not only does this expose the "normal" as a myth, but it reveals one reason why narratives may include characters with disabilities. Because of their seeming normality and averageness, 'normal' or able-bodied characters often lack the ability to "mobilize the story-telling effort": they do not tend to lend themselves to creating the "extraordinary circumstances" usually needed to drive a plot. This is why "deviance" and "exceptionality" are so often incorporated into literary plots, often via disabled characters (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 21).

⁴ The occurrence of such plot structures is also discussed in Martha Stoddard Holmes's articles "The Twin Structure: Disabled Women in Victorian Courtship Plots", and "Queering the Marriage Plot: Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady*".

The idea that characters with disabilities are sometimes used to signify the existence of some form of social collapse or “a crisis or a special situation” (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 15) is particularly pertinent to the analyses I put forward in my chapters on various sensation novels. This is an example of the “materiality of metaphor” mentioned by Mitchell: “physical and cognitive anomalies” are used “to lend a tangible body to textual abstractions”. Such utilization of disabled characters can lend them radical potentiality: physically or mentally disabled characters can act as interrupting forces “that confront[s] cultural truisms” (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 16). However, there are also drawbacks to using disabled characters in these ways. Giving a character a disability immediately lends them a “distinctive idiosyncrasy” and draws attention to them (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 16), but once marked by disability, “the character proceeds to become a case of special interest” (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 23). The character’s disability becomes their defining characteristic; the consequences of this may be a lack of development of other facets of their characterization or a continuation of tendencies to use and depict characters with disabilities in superficial, ‘stock’ ways.

Another strong tendency pointed out by Mitchell is that although literary narratives often use disabled characters as catalysts of social disruption, literary narratives almost always finally act to ‘contain’ such characters and their ‘excessiveness’. These characters are finally reined in; usually the character’s disability is successfully ‘fixed’. The alternative to this is that the character or their disability is obliterated:

Disability cannot be accommodated in the ranks of the norm(als), and thus there are two options for dealing with the difference that drives the story’s plot: a disability is either left behind or punished for its lack of conformity (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 23).

Therefore, although some literature takes an interest in disability, it usually follows this by overseeing “the extermination of the object of its fascination” (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 24).

I believe that Mitchell and Snyder’s development of the theory of narrative prosthesis will prove very valuable to the study of literary depictions of disability. However, when theorizing disability, there are also several other very basic issues that come up. To begin any theorizing at all, one first needs to consider the questions ‘*What is a disability?*’ and ‘*Who is disabled?*’ Such questions might appear to be straightforward, but they are surprisingly hard to answer; our beliefs about disability have always been dependent on social and historical context and received information. For example, one of the major issues that disability studies has contended with throughout its development is the

question of whether a ‘disability’ is primarily (or even entirely) a real, *material* phenomenon – that is, *something prompted by or consisting of physical or mental impairment* - or whether disability is primarily *a socially constructed phenomenon*. Is disability an actual ‘thing’ that is located in the body, something caused by an ‘impairment’ or ‘defect’, or is disability more like a social process or a disadvantage actually created by one’s environment?

Assuredly, throughout history, including throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western societies have tended to think of a disability as involving ‘impairment’. But in order to see the importance and complexity of such questions, one must imagine scenarios such as the following: someone who is paralyzed and in a wheelchair will probably be regarded by everyone who meets them as being physically disabled; it will commonly be considered that their disability is comprised of their paralysis. However, the person in the wheelchair might consider that the aspect of their experience they find most negative or debilitating is *not* their physical paralysis, but rather the inconvenience they encounter when buildings do not provide wheelchair ramps and buses do not lower to accommodate wheelchairs. They might consider that the most negative experiences associated with their ‘disability’ are prompted by their environment rather than directly caused by what others might regard as a bodily deficiency. If a wheelchair user’s environment was designed so that all ingress and egress of buildings and methods of transport were easy, the person using the wheelchair might feel significantly less disabled. Another way of framing this idea is that if the real issue at stake is the person’s degree of ‘immobility’, rather than their physical paralysis, then removing obstacles to their mobility could be seen as significantly decreasing their degree of disability. What if the ‘impairment’ - the apparent lack of functionality – does not really lie in the disabled person’s body, but actually lies in, or is at least exacerbated by, their environment’s failure to accommodate them?

There are two particular statements by disability theorists that are in line with such ideas and that I have kept in mind while writing this thesis. The first is Martha Stoddard Holmes’s statement that disability is “the experience of *living in a body for which your culture is not designed*” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 194; emphasis added), and the second is David T. Mitchell’s suggestion that “the disabled body” may actually be “any body capable of being narrated as outside the norm” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 17). Both statements are reflective of modern-day disability studies’ general focus on a “social model” of disability. They also open up the concept of ‘disability’ so

that it can refer to a broad range of examples of ‘difference’, and how society often tries to fix, contain, or shun such forms of difference.

Therefore, while some of the questions tackled by disability studies may appear basic, they often reveal themselves as highly complex or as engaging with society’s most fundamental beliefs and values. Asking and answering ‘who is disabled?’ and ‘what conditions qualify as disabilities?’ is not easy; sometimes it is contingent upon whether or not an individual identifies as disabled, and sometimes their self-identification as disabled or as able-bodied meets with social resistance.

As Mark Jeffreys explains in his article “The Visible Cripple (Scars and other Disfiguring Displays Included)”, this ‘social model’ of disability is highly reliant on modern social theories of constructivism – theories that consider an individual’s ‘identity’ as largely constructed by or dependent on their environment and various social or historical factors. Theories that base ideas of identity on “constructivist approaches are united by the assumption that all knowledge and all ways of knowing ... are historically confined, ideologically inflected, and culturally specific” (Jeffreys, “The Visible Cripple”, 31). Constructivist approaches recognise that almost all acquirable knowledge will be shaped by cultural and ideological bias, and that even the understanding of universally demonstrable facts may be affected by one’s culture, one’s place and time, one’s subjective consciousness, or previously or concurrently held beliefs. Constructivism therefore undermines the “epistemological certainty of empiricism” (Jeffreys, 32) and “can be used to question even the most entrenched assumptions about human nature” (Jeffreys, 31). As Jeffreys notes, such an approach is essential for carrying out “identity politics” (Jeffreys, 34), but complications may arise if the theories used seem to clash with the precepts of empirical knowledge and scientific theory.

As Jeffreys suggests, the ideal answer to this potential problem is likely that disability studies should mesh “the cultural materialism of historicist constructivism and the biological materialism of naturalist empiricism”, in order to develop “a new materialist praxis that is less prone to either cultural or biological determinism” (Jeffreys, 39). If we argue that disabilities are *only* culturally constructed (Jeffreys, 35) this ignores the existence of the body and that there can be such a thing as physical impairment. Taking such an extreme approach may actually “demonize the study of the biological aspects of our bodies”, and play into a mind-body dualism (Jeffreys, 39) that, historically, has always privileged the mind over the body.

Jeffreys's description of possible clashes between social constructionist understandings of disability and more materialist understandings of disability does point toward the fact that modern-day disability studies has developed in various directions, with some theorists emphasizing the bodily nature of disability and impairment and others more concerned with theorizing how limitations on the disabled are culturally imposed. Helen Meekosha has characterized disability theorists in Britain as tending to concentrate on theorizing "the impairment/social dichotomy", while "the American literature transcends the dichotomy by centralizing difference as a value – the human body appears in many forms, and it is implicitly a political act to describe some of these as 'impaired' compared to 'normal'" (Meekosha, "Drifting Down the Gulf Stream", n.p.). Some disability scholars do not attempt to theorize disability in a way that reconciles the material nature of disabilities and their social dimension, while others are very concerned to find a medium between these approaches. In this thesis, I will apply ideas from both of these strands of Disability Studies, but I am most interested in how social attitudes and medical discourses of the nineteenth century were used to create categories of disabilities and promote certain responses to the disabled, and how sensation fiction sought to complicate, and perhaps make improvements to, such responses.

Many disability theorists recognize that there has been a post-Enlightenment historical trend towards controlling, curing, or erasing "the extraordinary body".⁵ This trend has been aided by the development of psychiatric theory and scientific technologies. However, in contradistinction to this, many modern disability theorists work "to expose, historicize, and explain" how images and discourses related to disability and the "cripple" are created within society (Jeffreys, 38), to show how they have been detrimental to the disabled, and often to reverse such harmful discourses. In some cases, disability scholars point out the futility of society's attempts to elide disability: "some extraordinariness refuses to be hidden or cured ... The extraordinary body is precisely that body whose resistance to cultural constructions cannot be dissolved, *except by deception or destruction*" (Jeffreys, 38; emphasis added).

Because of such historical tendencies to elide or to attempt to 'cure' disabilities, another issue of importance to disability studies and activism is the question of whether a disabled person should be pushed to hide their disability – whether they should be expected to "mainstream" themselves and appear "as normal as possible" (see Jeffreys,

⁵ In the regard to which disability studies implicitly recognizes such trends and their importance, it owes a great deal to the theories and writing of Michel Foucault.

35). Many disability theorists view such societal expectations as involving a negative stance toward disability: such attitudes suggest that a visible disability or untreated condition is unacceptable. They also usually cater toward making the *able-bodied* feel more comfortable, not toward improving life for the disabled person. As Mark Jeffreys points out, social attitudes of this kind can negatively affect the self-esteem of the disabled and make it difficult for them to accept their disabilities.

A related difficulty arises even with the more apparently ‘positive’ representations of disability sometimes put forward by the media, or put forward through films and books that depict disabled characters, or via memoirs of disability. Often, such representations celebrate the idea of a disabled person achieving things that seem miraculous despite their disability, or celebrate their succeeding in eradicating their disability. Such representations are generally presented to, and accepted by, the public as being ‘inspirational’ or ‘heart-warming’. However, various disability scholars have pointed out that these representations may carry very troubling messages. They may, for example, inaccurately represent the severity of a disability or raise false hopes about the likelihood of a recovery from such a condition – they may seem to suggest that anyone with that particular disability could overcome it, if they are determined enough. This may make a disabled person feel guilty or disappointed about their personal inability to ‘triumph’ over that same disability. Not only do such stories frame ‘overcoming’ a disability as a ‘triumph’, they also frame it as the ideal behaviour for a disabled person to emulate, while also implying that disabled people cannot be happy as they are: disability is something to be avoided or something that must be ‘beaten’. Another implication is that the disabled person is non-normative and cannot be assimilated into mainstream culture until their disability has been veiled or cured. The eradication of the disability and possible assimilation into mainstream culture is presented as desirable; the disabled person is less acceptable or praiseworthy *while* they have their disability, and more acceptable when they battle against or *overcome* the disability. Such portrayals also risk presenting the person’s disability as the major feature of their identity (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 11).

This may be linked to the fact that, as some disability scholars also make clear, western literature and the media have not yet moved beyond ‘othering’ disability or representing it in negative terms. As Martha Stoddard Holmes suggests, even in the twentieth and early twenty-first century, “When ... narratives speak at all about disability, they teach us that it is alien, terrifying, tragic; that it transforms your life in

overwhelmingly negative ways” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, ix). Julia Miele Rodas makes a similar point, stating that there is still a pervasiveness of negative myths that suggest “that people with disabilities are pathetic, helpless, pitiable, or monstrous” (Rodas, “Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha”, 65). We routinely encounter literary narratives which make disabled people the “Other”,⁶ or that encourage us to “group them together as the objects of our experience instead of regarding them as subjects of experience with whom we might identify” and we usually see them “as symbolic of something ... we reject and fear and project onto them” (Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 60).

The dangers of such thinking are readily apparent in, for example, Nazi attitudes toward Jewish people and disabled people during the 1930s and 1940s, and other forms of eugenic thinking. ‘Othering’ people deprives them of subjectivity; it may even cause the person who engages in such thinking to deprive those they dislike or fear of any *humanity*. When such objectification and othering occurs, there can be no real understanding and no compassion. Yet, socially, we are presented with very few alternatives to this: there are very few positive paradigms by means of which we could “picture, talk about and enact the relationships to our own and others” bodies shaped by the able-disabled binary (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, ix).

Consideration of the representation of disability in literature (and, by extension, in other forms of media) is important, because, as the cultural theorist Sander Gilman emphasises, once an image of disease or illness is represented within literature or art, the public often take that image of the illness as a representation of the reality about that illness (see Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*, 2, 7). Athena Vrettos remarks on a similar phenomenon: “narratives of illness, whether in medical case histories, advice manuals, or literary texts” can have a very profound effect on shaping people’s “individual experiences of suffering”. When people experience a disability themselves, or encounter someone else with a disability, the representations they have previously encountered of disability can have a profound influence on whether they see the disabled body as abject, or as acceptable (Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 2).

The messages that many disability theorists attempt to convey are often in competition with messages about disability that are communicated by the medical industry. The

⁶ This concept was most thoroughly theorized by Simone de Beauvoir, but several disability theorists have utilized this term.

medical industry often emphasises the disabled individual's pathology, incapacity, or dependence on others, and by so doing, perpetuates stigmas attached to their disability. I will touch on this idea most fully in my chapter on Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which I consider the ways in which the Victorian psychiatric industry theorized forms of insanity; however, the medicalization and pathologization of various disabilities is an issue of importance throughout my entire thesis. What is important to remember in this regard is that the stigmas attached to disability are conveyed by a vast number of cultural media, including "legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse" and that tend to use the physically disabled body as "a repository for social anxieties about ... vulnerability, control, and identity" (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 6).

Because so many discourses link disability with negative experiences or negative appearances, the prevailing idea in Western culture is that disability is bad and always attended by stigma. Therefore, one of the aims of disability studies is to disrupt negative ideas about disability and to counter the stigma attached to disability. Disability studies can do this, for example, by pointing out that ideas of the 'anomalous' are not self-evident or even universal: they are in fact culturally constructed and highly dependent on historical and ideological developments. For example, according to the philosopher of science and historian Thomas S. Kuhn, a concept of the "anomalous" can only exist when placed against the idea of the "norm". The "anomalous" only emerges because objects or phenomena that are perceived as not fitting in are deliberately excluded from the paradigm of the "ordinary" or expected (Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 5; discussed in Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 37-8). These paradigms, the norm and the anomalous, are only created via "dominant cultural narratives" (Stoddard Holmes, "Preface", *Fictions of Affliction*, ix).

The task of disability studies is large, as so many negative ideas about disability are strongly entrenched in western culture, and have been for many years. Such messages are so powerful that sometimes even the life-writing and memoirs of people with disabilities tends to *reinforce* ableist attitudes toward disability (see Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 135)⁷ rather than counter master narratives that communicate negative messages about disability. This is presumably because some people who are disabled

⁷ In the examples of Victorian life writing studied by Stoddard Holmes, all the writers with disabilities "habitually locate themselves in relation to melodramatic figurations of disability" and "display an engagement with the master narratives of 'affliction' written by their larger culture.... none of these people articulates his or her life 'outside' these representations" (*Fictions of Affliction*, 135).

believe and internalize negative ideas about disability. However, even for disability scholars today it may be difficult to find neutral ways of discussing disability and the body or mind. Some disability scholars admit that it can be difficult to discuss disability without adopting loaded forms of language, sounding condescending or sentimental, accidentally engaging in scopophilia, or “producing a new frame of pathologization” (Stoddard Holmes, “Preface”, *Fictions of Affliction*, x). The issue of the representation of people with disabilities therefore involves a large number of complex questions about accuracy, social justice, aesthetic values, ethical responsibilities, social contexts, and the use of language.

Therefore, in my following examination of a particular genre of Victorian novel, I bear in mind that literature is always an artefact of its social context, reflecting something of its society’s ideology. My study assumes that we can greatly enhance our understanding of Victorian literature by adopting an interdisciplinary approach, by considering how it interacts with such fields of knowledge as history, social history, sociology and anthropology, medicine, psychology, and physiology. It has been pointed out by Sander Gilman that many connections exist between literary, artistic, and scientific representations of illness, disease and disability. Cultural objects can help us reconstruct “the social history of science”, and science “often understands and articulates its goals on the basis of literary or aesthetic models” (Gilman, “Preface”, *Disease and Representation*, xiii). Such interactions were particularly important during the Victorian period, particularly during the time period under question. Before considering the representation of disability in sensation novels, I therefore wish to discuss the wider issue of what typical representations of disability in mainstream Victorian literature were like.

Representations of disability in Victorian literature.

During the Victorian period it was not generally common to regard disability in terms of the disabled person’s social experience or to consider the degree to which their disability was socially constructed. The most common paradigms through which the Victorians viewed disability were to regard it in medical or biological terms of ‘impairment’, or to respond to disability in terms of its affective power: its apparent ability to provoke responses of pity, fear, or sympathy. In the paradigm that concentrates on the affective power of disability, disability is viewed as an ‘affliction’; in the medical paradigm, disability is regarded as a ‘defect’.

Therefore, as is apparent from the outline of modern-day disability studies I have provided, the major change between how disability was regarded in the Victorian period and throughout much of the twentieth century, and how it is regarded today by disability theorists, activists, by some disabled people, and by various cultural theorists, is that theorists and disability activists have moved away both from regarding disability via the 'medical model' of disability as an impairment or lack of normal functioning, and from concentrating on the 'affliction' caused by disability or from concentrating on disability's affective value. Instead, most disability theorists and some theorists from other disciplines have moved toward expressing a 'social model' of disability and toward celebrating 'difference'.

In this thesis I examine some representations of disability from the Victorian period that appeared within the sensation novel genre. The reign of Queen Victoria coincides with the period when many of the cultural and medical ideas that our current society has received about disability and many of the scientific paradigms through which we view disability were instigated, refined and ensconced. It was during the Victorian period that many forms of knowledge that we now think of as modern scientific disciplines were in their preliminary developmental phases. At the same time, the number of people who were disabled became increasingly apparent in Victorian culture: for example, as soldiers returned injured from overseas wars, as people were injured in railway accidents, and as beggars, often with disabilities, became more noticeable on the London streets (a phenomenon reported on by Andrew Halliday in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2)).

Disabled people were repeatedly portrayed in fiction. However, at the same time as many scientific developments were taking place, the common structural features of novels were also being decided. Various critics and writers argued over what subject matters were appropriate for the novel. In my discussions of sensation novels, I will explain how, to some critics, disability and illness were not appropriate topics to be the main concerns within a novel - unless, perhaps, the disability or illness was represented in a sentimental way or used to convey a moralizing message. Despite the objections of some critics, however, disability continued to be commonly represented, particularly in sensation fiction. The representations of disability within sensation fiction were often informed by recent scientific or psychological theories. This was not so often the case with representations within mainstream Victorian literature, which tended to continue representing disability using the paradigms of pity, sentimentality, and religious meaning.

The Victorian public in Britain were not only concerned about disability, but also very concerned more generally with problems related to health and hygiene and how these issues affected the body politic. Physical disabilities were particularly common during this time, sometimes caused or exacerbated by poor nutrition, which was prevalent in Britain. Lack of hygiene and lack of reliable water supplies aided the spread of disease, and many diseases could lead to debilitation. There was a lack of cures or vaccines for many diseases and viruses, and much of the population lacked access to reliable medical services. Various forms of ill health were brought on or exacerbated by difficult pregnancies and births (see Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*, 12-16, 21-23, 34, 48, 51, 57 for discussions of all of these issues). In addition, the rapid expansion of industry sometimes led to accidents that created disabilities: injuries were caused by industrial equipment and by train crashes; the expansion of industry also created new industrial diseases (see Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 206, 257-9, 264-5, 273). While England enjoyed a fairly long period of peace at home, many young men were involved in war abroad and returned home having lost the use of limbs, or otherwise injured.

In addition to the prevalence of physical injuries, disabilities, and ill health in Victorian England there was also an increasing awareness of issues relating to mental health. New discoveries were continually being made in this field, and new treatments developed, and psychology and psychiatry began to develop as specialised fields. The Victorians began to worry about an apparent increase in incidences and forms of insanity, yet also about the ease with which individuals could be misdiagnosed as mentally ill and wrongfully confined (see McCandless, “Dangerous to Themselves and Others”, and Shuttleworth, ““Preaching to the Nerves””).

Because the Victorians were so concerned with issues related to physical and mental health, bodily ideals and ideals of the normative, some modern disability theorists regard the nineteenth century as having ‘invented’ the idea of “the Disabled Body” (see Davis, “Constructing Normalcy”). While there were some extremely beneficial advances in science throughout the Victorian period, one unfortunate development of the increasing interest in physical and mental health was the emergence of ‘eugenics’ late in the nineteenth century, a field of thought that grouped together all people with ‘undesirable’ traits – for example, considering the ‘unfit’ to include not only habitual criminals and the insane, but also tramps, “the mentally defective, the alcoholic, the diseased from birth or from excess”, and so on (Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 33; qtd. in Davis,

“Constructing Normalcy”, 17). As eugenic theory gained influence, some cultural theorists and scientists began to conflate disability with depravity, defectiveness, “criminal activity, mental incompetence” and “sexual license”. As disability theorist Lennard J. Davis suggests, this is “a legacy that people with disabilities are still having trouble living down” (Davis, *ibid.*, 18).

These more destructive responses to disability only became prevalent late in the nineteenth century, but as early as the 1850s the Victorians were concerned with issues related to biological and mental inheritance, and these concerns can be discerned in the literature of the time. Martha Stoddard Holmes suggests that during the mid-Victorian period, the Victorians actually engaged with disability quite seriously in their literature and their social policies, and that while today’s society often tends to look back at the Victorians with an attitude of condescension, this condescension may be slightly misplaced when we consider Victorian responses to disability. Stoddard Holmes suggests, in fact, that the way that twenty-first century society thinks about disability might be *less* enlightened and *less* complex than the attitudes toward disability shown by the Victorians, because twenty-first century Western culture tends to “keep disability individual, sentimentalized, or vilified as a failure of volition or a mark of improvidence”. She feels that despite the shortcomings of some representations of disability in Victorian literature, the Victorians still explored “the question of affliction” with more energy than our own time period devotes to it (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 194).

Nevertheless, there are problematic issues related to mainstream Victorian fiction’s depictions of disability (as Stoddard Holmes also recognizes). In general, rather than depict the physically disabled in obviously negative ways, such as their being evil or lazy, disability was usually considered through the frame of pathos, represented as an unfortunate ‘affliction’ - although sometimes an affliction could be represented as having a certain romantic, poetic appeal. Characters with disabilities were often represented “in terms of melodramatic conventions” that were intended to evoke “pure pathos” (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 114). These melodramatic conventions and tropes associated with disability were well-known, and were largely inherited from melodramas staged in the theatre. Holmes suggests that examples of “‘Picturesque affliction’ as figured by deaf, mute, blind, or crippled characters” were inherited from a long list of

very successful melodramas, including Holcroft’s *Deaf and Dumb* (1801) and B.F. Rayner’s *The Dumb Man of Manchester* (1837). Blind characters

are central to James Kenney's *The Blind Boy* (1807), George Dibdin Pitt's *Belinda the Blind; or, the Stepmother's Vengeance* (1845); John Wilkins's *The Blind Wife* (1850), and the numerous English adaptations of D'Ennery and Cormon's *Les deux orphelines* (1874) (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 23).

Some of these melodramatic representations of disabilities came about due to the censorship of eighteenth and nineteenth-century theatre. In England and France only a few theatres were permitted to perform plays "that used spoken dialogue". Because of such restrictions, melodrama began to explore the potential of bodies that made use of "posture and gesture" (Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* 63; qtd. in Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 23) and that were "distinctive enough to 'speak' without words" (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 23).

Melodramatic and sentimental conventions surrounding disability were routinely solidified by examples of Victorian literature that focused on the affective power of disability. Such depictions represented disability as a pathetic state in which the disabled person was useless, lonely, and separated from ordinary life. Examples of such representations can be located in Dickens's characterizations of Tiny Tim (in *A Christmas Carol*, 1843) and Smike (in *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1838-9), for example. In such literary representations, disability is tragic, and the tendency is to encourage pity for 'sufferers' of disability. Moreover, it is either shown or assumed that the disabled are unlikely to get married or to have children, or to engage in professional life. Even a writer as scientifically informed as George Eliot, for example, still represented Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) as someone Maggie Tulliver was attracted to partly out of pity, and as someone who could never be a particularly satisfactory love match for her.

In addition to the more sentimental depictions, there was still some tendency in Victorian literature to cast disabled characters as villains – an idea that suggested that their 'deformed' or non-normative physical appearance was symptomatic of a wicked or deformed interior. Occasionally writers also presented characters with disabilities as comic characters. The work of Dickens, again, features numerous examples of such characterizations, and Dickens sometimes locates both wickedness and comicality within one disabled character: consider, for example, his representations of Silas Wegg (in *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864-5) and of Quilp (in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 1840-1). Dickens's depictions of disability did become increasingly complex later in his career – however, the fact that writers created such comic depictions of disability, or invested the disabled

with a form of moral wickedness, seems to suggest either a feeling of outright disgust in response to disability, or, at least a degree of discomfort: a wish to push the disabled away.

From my perusal of a number of the mainstream Victorian fictional representations of disability, from my having read a selection of the memoirs of Victorians who experienced disability, and with additional help from Stoddard Holmes's very useful overview of the period's literature about disability, and a few other critical studies of the topic, I have been able to identify some of the very common master-narratives and misconceptions that were communicated about disability in mainstream Victorian literature, in the life-writings of Victorians with disabilities, and in scientific writings. These master-narratives stress the following ideas: a) Having or gaining a disability is a serious calamity that will ruin one's life or make one miserable. b) People with disabilities are always isolated and always suffering. c) Disabled people are generally passive, helpless victims. d) Physically disabled people are not capable of working. e) Disabled people should not go into society, and should stay out of sight. Within some "life-writing" this is suggested because the disabled person's mixing with other ("normal") people makes the other people feel uncomfortable or inconvenienced.⁸ Alternatively, it is because mixing with other people will apparently make the disabled person feel uncomfortable and comparatively useless; they will feel they cannot socialize successfully. f) People with disabilities cannot be sexually active or get married.⁹ g) People with disabilities should not have children, because they run a risk of passing their impairment on to their child/ren.

Sometimes Victorian literature adopts a slightly different viewpoint to this strong focus on impairment and restrictions, framing it within an outline of Christian meaning and faith. While this offers an alternative viewpoint of disability, providing the disabled person with a way to understand their disability and possibly regard it in more favourable terms, this viewpoint also has limitations. Such a viewpoint still places disability within a sentimental paradigm. Adopting this understanding of disability may provide some form of strength or comfort to the disabled, as it encourages them to live with their disability,

⁸ See, for example, Harriet Martineau's "Letter to the Deaf", 251, quoted by Stoddard Holmes in *Fictions of Affliction*, 152-153, and Martineau's *Autobiography* Vol. I, 95, quoted in *Fictions of Affliction*, 155. See also Kitto, *The Lost Senses*, 138-139 (a different edition of which is quoted from in *Fictions of Affliction*, 158).

⁹ The rationale for this, seemingly still believed by many today, is either that the disabled are presumed to be naturally 'asexual' or are regarded as having been disqualified from sexual behaviour by their disability. Another rationale was the Victorian obsession over questions of which illnesses, diseases and disabilities were hereditary.

looking forward to the time when, in heaven, they will either be free from their body or will be given a new, healthy mind and body. Additionally, in this paradigm, disability is seen as having the potential to be a hidden blessing. The disabled person may regard themselves as having been singled out by God for a special role, or in order to have their faith and patience tested. Living with a disability can therefore be a state of Christian blessedness in which the disabled person has an opportunity to develop their spirituality, while also being a good example to others via their patience and resilience.¹⁰ Some drawbacks of such ideas, of course, are that they discourage any questioning of God's will and of the 'fairness' of having a disability, and disabled Christians who feel unable to view their disability so peacefully may feel guilty about their lack of faith. Moreover, such ideas do not accommodate any acknowledgement of the disabled person's agency (they are simply a vehicle of God's will), and they ignore any responsibility that society should bear to accommodate the disabled person.

These melodramatic and affective forms of representation were so commonplace that even people who were themselves disabled could find it very difficult to comprehend and represent their own lives and experiences in any way other than through these same paradigms. As a result, the life-writings of Victorians who had disabilities often repeated restrictive conceptions of disabled people as pitiable, isolated, or incompetent; as Stoddard Holmes asserts, "disabled people were virtually born into the context of these representations at the moment of their impairment", and "required to participate in their existence" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 189). Therefore, these memoirists appear to have internalized restrictive views about disability, and when writing about their lives, often rely on "melodramatic figurations of disability" that "emphasize extremity" (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 135). The alternative to such constructions seems to have occurred when memoirists represented themselves as having battled through life and as having been successful *despite* their disability (John Kitto's *The Lost Senses* (1845) is one such example – but even this approach is contained within a master-narrative that suggests that being disabled is a calamity. It appears that most Victorian novelists, and even most Victorians writing about their own disabilities, were unable to imagine empowering ways to think about or represent the disabled.

Thus, although we find disabled characters appearing in a surprisingly large number of Victorian novels, we usually find that they are represented through one of the restrictive

¹⁰ Stoddard Holmes refers to this belief as "the Providential frame of Divine affliction and compensation" (*Fictions of Affliction*, 183).

or stigmatizing paradigms mentioned above. This is apparent with some now famous examples of disabled characters in Victorian literature, including Charles Dickens's Tiny Tim, Smike, and Silas Wegg, George Eliot's Philip Wakem, Anthony Trollope's Signora Neroni, and Dinah Mulock Craik's Olive.¹¹ The frequency with which disabled characters appear in Victorian novels suggests that novelists did expect the reading public to feel interest in such characters. However, the representations generally remain within the sentimental, comic, sinister, or religious paradigms mentioned above, and the disabled characters in mainstream Victorian novels are almost always secondary or marginal characters. For the most part, it does not appear that mainstream representations of disabled characters in Victorian literature were very often prompted by any authorial belief that public perceptions about the disabled needed to be adjusted. Instead, most fictional representations of disability seem to take for granted the truth of the traditional view of disability as a piteous affliction, and emphasise this for dramatic effect. Another tendency was, as mentioned in the work of Mitchell and Snyder, to use the character's disability in order to help drive the novel's plot in some way. Even though the mainstream literature of the period does engage with disability and respond to its prevalence, and sometimes responds to new scientific knowledge from the developing fields of psychology, psychiatry, physiology, evolutionary theory, or pseudo-sciences such as phrenology and mesmerism, the representations of disabled characters in most Victorian fiction never becomes particularly three-dimensional in terms of depicting the characters' social interactions and psychology.

The representation of the disabled in Victorian fiction has not yet been studied thoroughly, although it has attracted an increasing degree of attention in recent years. The greatest degree of attention has been directed toward Dickens's disabled characters - probably due to Dickens's enduring popularity, and because his novels include so many characters with disabilities. Another area that has been of increasing interest to Victorianists is the Victorian freak show, with several recent studies of the freak show appearing.¹² However, the portrayal of disabled characters by other Victorian novelists has not attracted as much attention. One exception to this trend is that a small number of critics have begun to take note of the unusual frequency of disabled characters in the fiction of Wilkie Collins. My own study therefore follows in the wake of some previous

¹¹ As mentioned, Tiny Tim appears in *A Christmas Carol*, Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend*. Philip Wakem appears in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Signora Neroni appears in *Barchester Towers* (1857), and Olive appears in Dinah Mulock Craik's *Olive* (1850).

¹² Recent titles on this topic include *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery* (2008), *Spectacle of Deformity* (2010), and *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability* (2011).

studies of Collins's depictions of disability or infirmity. However, I shall tend to focus on characterizations by Collins that have not been examined in much detail, and, in some cases, on works by Collins that have barely been analyzed by critics at all. Meanwhile, the study of physically or mentally disabled characters in the works of Braddon has not been at all common; such explorations barely exist, apart from some considerations of the ramifications of concepts of insanity and monomania in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Over the past few years Martha Stoddard Holmes has emerged as the leading scholar of disability in Victorian literature, and one major focus of her work in *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*, and in other academic articles, is her examination of how, in Victorian fiction, the disabled are almost always barred from matrimony or child-bearing. She explains that there was "a pervasive trope in Victorian literature in which two women characters, one disabled and one nondisabled, are paired in a courtship plot". The able-bodied woman marries, while the disabled one "suffers" and "feels unsatisfied longings", and is then "assigned a role outside the world of courtship and marriage" (Stoddard Holmes, "The Twin Structure: Disabled Women in Victorian Courtship Plots", 222-23).

In *Fictions of Affliction*, Stoddard Holmes asserts that novelistic representations of disability *did* have a discernible effect on the way that the Victorians thought about disability and that they were in fact "a major vehicle for the transfer of cultural values about disability". She suggests that the novel form had a particular power to affect what readers believed about various topics, and that readers then and now seem to take note of what literary representations of disability say, much more than they take note of what non-fiction texts - a "sociological text", for example - says about disability (see *Fictions of Affliction*, 32). This may well be an accurate perception of the educational and ideological power that novels held during the nineteenth century, as novels were the predominant artistic form. If the reader of a novel did not personally know a person with a disability, the representation of the disabled supplied by novels might be the only information about disability that the reader was able to access. If a reader encountered a book that presented a disabled character as a pathetic object of pity, this might encourage the reader to look at disabled people with pity, but if a book depicted a disabled character as loathsome or as being to blame for their disability, the reader might develop a negative response to people with disabilities.

In twenty-first century society it is not always easy for the public to identify and counter negative and inaccurate messages about disability, because we still retain –

much as the Victorians had – a valorization of physical and mental health, and still generally accept as true many of the same myths about disability that the Victorians held. Many of these myths are deeply entrenched in our culture. Even within modern western culture, there are very few alternatives to the responses of “pity or avoidance” that the “able-disabled binary” encourages us to feel (Stoddard Holmes, “Preface”, *Fictions of Affliction*, ix). Disability theorists encourage us to question such binaries and disability theory provides us with the tools to do so.

Stoddard Holmes suggests that there may be a number of pitfalls associated with examining representations of disabled characters in Victorian literature. While she notes the increasing critical attention being paid to such characters, she suggests there is still a tendency to read disabled characters “as emotional props, plot stimulants whose ontological status is closer to scenery than character” (Stoddard Holmes, “The Twin Structure”, 223-24), or “as metaphors for the situation of some other group within Victorian culture (e.g., women or the poor)” (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 224). The study of disabled characters in Victorian fiction has moved on a little since Stoddard Holmes expressed such concerns, but I agree that reading disabled characters only as “symbols” that represent other social concerns or other marginalized groups, or reading them as only existing to further the denouement of a main plot are both limited approaches. Certainly many Victorian novels, including those I shall discuss in this thesis, do use disabled characters in such ways. However, there are still many other aspects of their characterization to be explored.

While noting some advances in disability theory volumes and individual essays that were recent at the time of her writing her own studies, Stoddard Holmes also laments that some previous analyses of disability in Victorian fiction suggest a lack of awareness of the history of disability, via their failure to ground the disabled characters within the idea of any disabled community, or within the context of scientific developments (Stoddard Holmes, “The Twin Structure”, 224). I have tried to avoid such pitfalls while conducting my study; therefore, my studies of each novel examined in this thesis situate the disabled characters discussed within the context of contemporaneous scientific or social developments and important Victorian viewpoints regarding their particular disability. My studies have required me to acquire extensive knowledge about the practical and ideological problems faced by real disabled persons in the nineteenth century, and to become familiar with the scientific thought about physical and mental disability that was contemporaneous with the novels I examine.

This is also particularly important because, to a large extent, it is the greater awareness of and questioning of various scientific fields, and of ideas about perception and cognition that are displayed in some sensation novels that allow these sensation novels to stand out from more mainstream novels in terms of the greater depth obtained in their depictions of disability. It is the sensation novel's engagement with scientific knowledge, coupled with its greater awareness of the *social* forms and functions of disability, that makes its depictions of disabled characters seem particularly 'accurate', modern, and advanced. In the following subsection I shall discuss some of the scientific context that held particular importance during the 1850s to 1880s, and segue into a discussion of how such scientific ideas were referred to and questioned in the sensation novels considered in this thesis. The section that follows is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of all of the facets and areas of Victorian science that operated during the mid-century. Rather, it is intended to introduce the ideas that seemed to be of most interest to the two leading sensation novelists, Collins and Braddon, and which thus became most pertinent to the sensation novel.

The scientific and cultural context of the mid-nineteenth century, and sensation fiction's response to this context.

The sensation novels that I examine in this study, written over the period of 1854 to 1875, stand out from mainstream Victorian novels and their depictions of disability due to their strong interest in the world of the senses and in the processes of the conscious and unconscious mind. These particular interests are a large factor in how sensation novelists, especially Collins and Braddon, were often able to present disabled individuals as well-rounded characters and agents. The representations of disability in sensation novels by Collins and Braddon often appear to have two major, distinct aims: the first is to amend social attitudes toward the physically and mentally disabled by better informing the public about a particular disability, and the second is to create situations of ideological uncertainty regarding physical and mental disability, in order to shake the preconceptions of their readers. Sometimes these aims interact and aid one another's achievement.

A large part of the ability that Collins and Braddon's writing has to shake such preconceptions lies in the particularly strong interest that they took in scientific fields of knowledge. Not only does their writing reflect a great deal of Victorian scientific knowledge and controversies, but it also engages in a dialogue with it: sometimes questioning it, sometime presenting it as incorrect or pointing out its more problematic

implications. At other times, their work uses Victorian scientific knowledge or theories as a framework to shine a light on various social concerns. The fields that Collins and Braddon seemed particularly interested in and responded to in their depictions of disability were, in general terms, forms of scientific knowledge related to psychological associationism and unconscious mental processes, the study of sensory processes, mind-body duality and interactions between mind and body, the nature of various pathologies, the boundary between sanity and insanity, and issues relating to such theories as phrenology, physiology, biological determinism, and degeneration theory.

During the mid-late nineteenth century, complex developments were taking place in many scientific fields.¹³ In the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, it had been biologists and ordinary physicians who had practised ‘mental physiology’. Psychiatry did not yet exist as a separate branch of scientific knowledge. J.A.V. Chapple suggests that the science now called ‘psychology’ was not referred to as such “until about mid-century” – before this, it “was often called ‘mental philosophy’ or ‘science of mind’” (Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, 99). Rick Rylance also identifies the term “psychology” as settling “into recognizably modern usage in the first half of the nineteenth century” (Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture: 1850-1880*, 13). By the 1860s and 1870s psychology and psychiatry were established as separate and fast developing fields of knowledge.¹⁴ In the middle years of the century, psychology remained very much linked to philosophy and biology,¹⁵ but as the century wore on, physicians and biologists became differentiated from psychiatrists and psychologists.

Nineteenth-century psychology was based on “two distinct intellectual traditions: the more idealist and abstract associationism, concerned with patterns of ideas within the mind, and the staunchly materialist field of phrenology, concerned with the structure of the mind’s physical organ, the brain” (Taylor, “Nobody’s Secret: Illegitimate Inheritance and the uncertainties of memory”, 576). Phrenologists were particularly concerned to find or emphasise physiological links between the mind, brain and body.

¹³ Lyn Pykett’s chapter on “Psychology and Science in Collins’s Novels” notes that “the ‘laws’ of evolution seemed to require as much commentary and exegesis as the biblical and theological ‘laws’ which they sought to replace, and new theories of consciousness and the mind were no less perplexing for being based ... in physiology” (Pykett, *Wilkie Collins* (Authors in Context series), 165).

¹⁴ An article hosted at a website for The Victoria and Albert Museum states: “in 1846 the term ‘psychiatry’ was coined to denote medical treatment of disabling mental conditions, which were generally held to have hereditary causes” (Jan Marsh, “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men”).

¹⁵ Rylance, 21.

Associationist psychology was particularly dominant in Britain in the 1860s and 1870s. One of the main precepts of Associationism was that identity was “based on the interplay between conscious and unconscious associations in an intricate process of suggestion which is dependent on memory”. Its premise was “that we are who we are” because of the influence that early mental impressions assert on us when they are “reproduced in new combinations through the working of unconscious memory” (Taylor, *ibid.*, 576).

Associationism “sought physical explanations for mental behaviour and mental explanations for physical behaviour, hoping to find verifiable links between the sound mind and the sound body” (Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, 35). The empirical physiologist W.B. Carpenter “suggested that a whole range of human activities hitherto classified as ‘mental’ were in fact physical in nature” (Haley, 36), and eventually, most doctors investigating psychology began to believe “that one could not speak knowingly about mental behavior without at least some previous study of the body” (Haley, 37).¹⁶ By 1854, Benjamin Brodie, one of Britain’s leading doctors, was convinced that “‘mental alienation is generally the result of some wrong condition of the body, either functional or organic’” (Brodie, *The Works of Sir Benjamin Collins Brodie, Bart.*, Volume I, 159; qtd. in Haley, 38). Therefore, throughout the nineteenth century psychology began to incorporate knowledge from physiology – the study of the functioning of organs (see Chapple, 108) - and neurology, the study of the brain (see Mangham, “How Do I Look?”, 84). Psychology moved toward a more materialist, somatically-based investigation of what affected individual behaviour. As early as 1832, Sir David Brewster had written that

it is obvious that the office of the nervous system is, to produce sensation; but it is extremely difficult to comprehend the manner in which this is accomplished ... The general doctrine on the subject is, that the brain is the centre of the system, the part to which all the rest are subservient ... that the nerves receive impressions from external objects, and transmit these impressions to the brain, where they become sensible to the mind, and the intellectual faculties (Brewster, *The Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*, Volume 15, 629).

Throughout the middle years of the century, the “brain and the central nervous system came to be regarded by most psychologists as the key to understanding the operation of

¹⁶ Physiological psychologists viewed the mind and brain as different, with the mind a more stable entity and the brain able to change organically (Haley, *op cit.*, 38-9). Many mental processes were believed to be automatic (Haley, 38). Thomas Henry Huxley believed in a kind of “dual-aspect parallelism: mental states correspond to physical states but do not interact with them” (Haley, 39).

the mind” – as suggested by book titles such as Alexander Bain’s *Mind and Body* (1873), Thomas Laycock’s *Mind and Brain* (1860), and Henry Maudsley’s *Body and Will* (1883) (see Haley, 38). Jane Wood, writing about the Victorian focus on mind-body interaction, explains that it began to seem logical to scientists that “the nervous system formed the vital bridge between the body’s sensations and the mind’s consciousness of them” (Wood, *Passion and Pathology*, 3).

A growing number of illnesses, diseases and disorders were seen as having both mental and physical origins, as affecting physical and mental operation simultaneously, or even as changing their location between the two: “A disease which began as a neurosis might pass into an acute stage which was mainly physiological” (Haley, 32). For example, nervousness and “brain fever” could lead to physical problems, while mental turmoil could affect the body; such beliefs led to the popularity of hydropathy and the rest-cure (Haley, 33). Nervous disorders were considered “neither obviously organic nor mental” but to be disorders “occurring in the connections between mental and bodily experience” (Wood, 4).

While associationist psychology remained dominant, other schools of theory such as biologism and positivism were in development. G.H. Lewes and William Carpenter, for example, wished “to understand the mind as a physical entity”. Spencer, Lewes and Carpenter “adapted the phrenological model”, but transformed both the phrenological model and associationist psychology by considering them “in the light of evolutionary theory”. These scientists asserted that “identity is formed through repetition and habit carving channels in the mind” (Taylor, “Nobody’s Secret”, 576).¹⁷ While the phrenological theory they adapted stressed the great influence of “inherited predispositions” on the individual, it also “stressed the importance of learning to understand and control one’s different tendencies”. Phrenological theory, generally very determinist in outlook, was nevertheless adapted to underpin “the work of the asylum reform movement” and “its stress on moral management” (Taylor, *ibid.*, 577).

Some critics writing about the science of this time period suggest that Cartesian dualism, which emphasised a “sharp distinction between mind and body” remained the “main frame of reference” for nineteenth century psychologists (Chapple, 99).¹⁸ However, it is clear from the examples above that during the middle decades of the

¹⁷ Phrenology had been developed on the Continent by Franz Joseph Gall. In Britain, phrenological ideas were promoted by George Combe in *The Constitution of Man* (1830). See Taylor, “Nobody’s Secret”, 577.

¹⁸ Haley states that some scientists actually remained loyal to Cartesian beliefs, continuing to hold that the “body has extension but cannot think” and “mind can think but has no extension” (Haley, *op cit.*, 39).

century many scientists were seeking to explore or prove the ways that mind and body and mind and brain were interconnected. Despite advances, many of these questions remained unresolved. For example, the physiologist P.M. Roget, writing in 1834, acknowledged in *Animal and Vegetable Physiology* that physiologists had not been able to figure out how sense impressions interacted with the brain (Roget, *Animal and Vegetable Physiology*, Vol. II, 506; qtd in Chapple, *Science and Literature*, 109), and Bruce Haley states that Victorian scientists were never able to define the difference between the mind and the brain (Haley, op cit., 38).¹⁹

At the same time, theories related to how physiognomy revealed character or revealed one's past maintained some influence, with some scientists still believing "that mental and moral attributes and deficiencies were discernible in the physical appearance of the body" (Wood, *Passion and Pathology*, 30). The even older idea of the psychosomatic 'temperaments' also retained minor influence, bearing some correlation with more modern theories about nervous disorders. Because of the relative lack of certainty about the origins and processes of various diseases and ailments, many Victorian doctors were in the habit of viewing "the patient as a totality of mind and body" (Haley, 35) and treating their patients' diseases in a holistic fashion, considering the patient's life circumstances as possible factors behind both mental and physical illnesses (Haley, 33).

The mid- to late-Victorian period also saw the development of degeneration theory, a discourse about the processes of physical, mental, and cultural 'degeneration' that were believed to be threatening Europe. Degeneration theory had begun to develop as early as the 1850s, partly as a response to Darwinian evolutionary theory. While Darwin theorized that organisms adapt in order to better survive, it was also theorized that if species could 'improve', they could also do the opposite, degenerating to less evolved versions of themselves. While Max Nordau was to become the most famous theorist of degeneration, with the appearance of his work *Degeneration (Entartung)* in 1892, degeneration theory had first appeared in 1857 when Benedict Augustin Morel published his *Treatise on Degeneration* (1857).²⁰ The criminological studies of Cesare Lombroso,

¹⁹ Indeterminacy about interaction between the mind and body led to fictional writing such as that described by William A. Cohen in *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*. Cohen states that "Victorian fiction frequently recurs to the body's materiality in representing inner being" (Cohen, *Embodied*, 11).

²⁰ The full name of the treatise is *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes produisant ces variétés malades*.

written from the 1860s onwards, were also of major importance to the development of such theories.²¹

Degeneration theory became extremely influential in the 1890s. It reached its apex with the publication of Nordau's *Degeneration*, and soon became linked to the theories of Social Darwinism and eugenics:

Nordau identified in the literary and artistic tendencies of the time a type of modern individual which he named the degenerate. Distinguished by a lack of mental discipline and a contempt for conventional custom and morality, the degenerate, according to Nordau, also exhibited a number of mental and physical 'stigmata' which were in turn symptoms of a diseased and exhausted brain (Guy, *The Victorian Age*, 415-16).

Both Morel and Nordau believed that 'degeneracy' encompassed nervous and mental maladies and was reflected in unhealthy contemporary tastes (see Nordau, "Chapter III: Diagnosis", *Degeneration*, 15-6).

However, ideas related to degeneration would already have been familiar to much of the Victorian reading public in the 1870s, and this theory's influence upon the plot concerns of sensation fiction is easily discernible. Novels by both Collins and Braddon display an interest in forms of biological and mental 'inheritance'. Amongst the concerns explored in their novels is the topic of 'moral insanity', an issue explored by Henry Maudsley during the mid-century, and later linked to degeneration by Nordau (see Nordau, *Degeneration*, 18).

This concept of 'degeneration' was often used as an explanation for or a descriptor of a perceived increase in "the incidence of insanity and mental and physical disorders". This perceived increase in mental disorders was often blamed on the growing pace and stress of modern life (Pykett, *Wilkie Collins*, 184). Therefore, while elements of degeneration theory were linked to the idea that society was being plunged into a state of atavism, degeneration was also held to occur due to the over-refinement of Western civilization (Pykett, *ibid.*, 182); as sources of stimulation increase, so do levels of anxiety.²² It was thought that mental and physical degeneration could occur if one

²¹ See Guy, *The Victorian Age*, 415, for information on Lombroso's influence on Nordau; note also that Nordau's *Degeneration* was dedicated to Lombroso.

²² Degeneration as a result of anxiety was sometimes referred to as "enervation", and "[e]levated nervousness" was believed to be "visible in and on the body" (Logan, *Nerves and Narratives*, xii). Meanwhile, in the first few decades of the nineteenth-century, thinkers "expressed the fears that the civilizing process, with its sedentary occupations, its incessant traffic in opinions, and its quest for heightened sensibility might overstimulate the mind and the passions while sapping bodily strength" (Porter, "Foreword", in Logan, *Nerves and Narratives*, n.p. (accessed at <<http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft5d5nb38x;chunk.id=0;doc.view=print>>)).

deliberately chose to indulge in stimulations and passions – by living a decadent lifestyle, or by becoming overly anxious about work or sexuality. Individual physical enfeeblement could also occur via the depletion of one’s energy (see Wagner, “Sports, Cruelty, and (Moral) Breakdown”).²³

Degeneration was therefore linked to fears about both individual deterioration of bodily and mental health and anxieties about wider society. Degeneration theory represented “the scientized fear of historical reversion, of polluting inheritance” (Luckhurst, *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, xx), but the concept of degeneration was also social: it was thought that entire cultures or civilizations could degenerate. John Glendening, for example, explains that late Victorian society was concerned about the “degeneration or decay – of society, races, species, even of the cosmos itself”, and that many suspected that Victorian ‘progress’ was actually a form of regression, that society was losing “much of traditional cultural value” (Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination*, 48).

Since the leading works of Victorian psychology and psychiatry frequently mention ‘senses’ and ‘nerves’ and display a strong focus on the interactions between the mental and the somatic, it is not difficult to see how the psychology, physiology, and psychiatry of the mid-century could be exceedingly important to the sensation novel genre, which often featured narratives focusing on forms and experiences of physical sensation. Degeneration theory was relevant to sensation fiction’s focus on physical, mental, and social inheritances from past generations, and also to its interest in psychological and sensory processes. Scientific theories and paradigms relating to associationist psychology, moral management, the interactions between mind and body, somatic and psychological inheritances and degeneration’s effect upon succeeding generations all inspire elements of the plotlines of sensation novels.

Various cultural theorists have pointed out that during the Victorian period the distinction between the “world of art” and “world of science” was not highly pronounced.²⁴ Despite this, as I suggested earlier, not many Victorian mainstream novels attempt to argue against or provide alternatives to the dominant ideas about disability that circulated in Victorian culture. Many mainstream representations of disabled

²³ The human physical body is here treated as a symbol for the larger body politic; this is a common feature in literature pertaining to disability.

²⁴ Marina Benjamin states “the stories privileged in a culture tend to be also privileged in its science” (Benjamin, “A Question of Identity”, 19). Benjamin is paraphrasing Gillian Beer’s “Discourses of the Island”. See also Anne Stiles’s article “Victorian Psychology and the Novel”, 669-70, and *Neurology and Literature, 1860-1920*, edited by Anne Stiles.

characters could now be considered ‘ableist’ – that is, discriminatory toward people with disabilities or privileging those who are able-bodied. Although mainstream Victorian novelists often suggested that the public should be accepting of and compassionate toward the disabled, they nevertheless appear negative in terms of the way that they convey very limiting assumptions about what life is like for someone with a disability, and what is possible for a disabled person. One such example, as mentioned earlier, is their almost always taking it for granted that any character with a disability would be ineligible for matrimony. However, representations of disability are often much more nuanced and challenging in the sensation novel genre, and some of the novelists working within the sensation genre - Collins and Braddon in particular - were concerned with identifying, deconstructing and questioning ideas about physical or mental disability.

Sensation fiction is generally considered to have appeared during the 1850s to 1870s; the most famous sensation novels appeared between 1859 and the late 1860s. Sensation fiction is now generally accepted to have constituted its own genre, but in some respects its style and content overlaps with mainstream Victorian fiction. The sensation novel also shared many elements of the earlier Gothic novel, and in recent years has been referred to as “domestic Gothic”, “female Gothic”, or as a form of Victorian Gothic.²⁵ Some readily identifiable features of sensation novels seemed to mark them out from realist or domestic fiction: their frequent focus on crime, family secrets, mystery, and transgressive women. Sensation novels were therefore usually regarded as offering something different than ‘realistic’ mainstream novels did, while still retaining some elements of realism. For this reason it is now often thought of as an amorphous, “hybrid” genre.²⁶ It may be considered unsurprising that disabled characters frequently appeared in sensation novels, as their appearance is in keeping with the genre’s general interest in forms of ‘deviance’.

Sensation fiction was often critically denounced, as it was thought to unnecessarily excite readers and to negatively influence their morals. While the ‘realist’ novel was considered to encourage the reader to ‘see’ clearly, and to cultivate social wisdom, sensation fiction was held to appeal only “to the nervous system” (Ferguson, “Sensational Dependence: Prosthesis and Affect in Dickens and Braddon”, 3). While the “optocentric genre” of realist novels had the ostensible function of encouraging a “more

²⁵ It has been referred to via such terms by Tamara S. Wagner, Richard Nemesvari (““Judged by a Purely Literary””), Tamar Heller, and Patrick R. O’Malley, amongst others. Catherine Spooner notes that the sensation novel participates “fully in Gothic conventions without having always been critically recognised as Gothic as such” (Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*, 14).

²⁶ See Harrison and Fantina, “Introduction”, *Victorian Sensations*, xi and xii.

ethical gaze” (Ferguson, 4), sensation fiction was not seen as doing this. Instead, it was repeatedly criticised for encouraging “physical impulsion and emotional excess” (Ferguson, 4), and for existing simply to thrill readers; to electrify their nerves.²⁷ Today, many critics have a much more sophisticated and appreciative view of sensation fiction, no longer regarding the sensation novel as a low-quality, marginal sub-genre of Victorian fiction. A more typical modern view is that sensation fiction is “a dynamic and dissident articulation of a new side to the mid-Victorian literary landscape” (Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 27).

In retrospect, it appears fairly ironic that sensation fiction was considered so immoral or corrupting, because despite sensation fiction’s negative reputation for dissidence, some sensation writers certainly felt the urge to push their readers toward forms of moral improvement, just as many more ‘mainstream’ and critically acclaimed writers did. As will become apparent in my discussions of their novels, Collins and Braddon wanted readers to rethink how they regarded the physically and mentally disabled and how to respond to them in more empathic and ethical ways.

Where melodramatic and sentimental depictions of disability were preoccupied with the idea of “innocent suffering” and concerns about “the transmission of defect” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 3), one of the most innovative features of sensation fiction, and one of its most important humanitarian achievements, was the way that it began to move away from sentimental and pathetic representations and to either downplay or bypass such concerns about “innocent suffering” and the “transmission of defect”. While novels by Collins and Braddon may represent such concerns, they nevertheless often point out the troubling aspects of such preoccupations – for example, showing that the concern with innocent suffering may make the disabled seem pathetic or deprive them of agency, or implying that concerns about the transmission of defect are needlessly deterministic and deprive the disabled of the right to be sexual beings.

It has also been noted by David T. Mitchell that western literature has been dominated by texts that use disability “first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphoric device” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 15). However, the representations of the disabled in the sensation novels that I focus on in this thesis are atypical; they demonstrate how it is possible for literature to avoid reproducing negative, detrimental, and one-dimensional representations of the disabled. Sensation fiction engaged in more thoughtful, scientifically accurate, and provocative representations of

²⁷ See Mansel, 492, Oliphant, 574, and Ferguson, 4-5.

disability than was common at the time, with Collins and Braddon in particular explicitly and implicitly challenging some of the ideas about disability that underpinned its earlier dramatic and fictional representation.

It was Wilkie Collins who achieved the most in this regard: Collins's works probably contain the most sympathetic portrayals of people with disabilities that occur in any novels of the Victorian period. However, his creation of these representations was also guided by his wish to achieve scientific accuracy with such portrayals. As if in anticipation of Stoddard Holmes's call for writing that responds to disability via modes other than pity and fear, Collins's writing suggests more positive ways of looking at and interacting with the disabled. Meanwhile, although she probably had more limited success in doing so, Mary Elizabeth Braddon also attempted to create alternative ways of thinking about and representing the disabled; in *The Trail of the Serpent* she delivers a particularly memorable representation of a mute man, and in *Lady Audley's Secret* she seems especially concerned to question various societal assumptions about mental illness.

Social context is particularly relevant to sensation fiction, as sensation novelists often wrote in direct response to pressing issues of the day, especially those which related to scientific developments and legal developments. Collins and Braddon's fiction shows a particular interest in engaging with the scientific fields and concerns mentioned above, incorporating such concerns as the differences between the able-bodied and the disabled, the workings of the mechanisms of sensation, the working of mental processes and memory, links between physical and mental pathology, and the possible effects of degeneration; they often make such concerns the cruxes of their novels. For example, Collins's *Hide and Seek* focuses on the life of a deaf and mute girl, showing readers how the character's sensory and psychological experiences may differ from those of a hearing and speaking person. Meanwhile, *The Law and the Lady* by Collins and *The Trail of the Serpent* and *Lady Audley's Secret* by Braddon engage with such issues as moral insanity, hereditary insanity, degeneration, and phrenology. By confronting and discussing fears and assumptions related to disability and difference, various works by Collins and Braddon aim to shake prejudices against the disabled, or at least make their readers better informed.

While discussing the concepts put forward by modern-day disability studies, I mentioned some of the common trends in literary representations of disabled characters and how representations can carry problematic connotations or perpetuate 'ableist' views. Some of the works I study within this thesis use disabled characters in ways that, on the

surface, appear to repeat some of the tendencies of past representations: for example, in some cases, using disability as a social metaphor. However, most of them also move beyond such limited forms of representation, such as by foregrounding the disabled character by making them a *primary* character in the plot, rather than a marginal one, by emphasising social and political aspects of their disability (see Mitchell, *ibid.*, 16),²⁸ thus creating a more nuanced portrayal, or by not insisting on the treatment or the obliteration of the character's disability.

Another important interest in my thesis will be to consider how the sensation novelists theorized and depicted relationships between physical disability and mental illness and between mind and body. Their examination of mind and body interrelation engages with one of the issues mentioned earlier in this Introduction: as noted by the disability theorist Tobin Siebers, throughout history medical theorists have often tried to position the physically disabled as inherently psychologically pathological. Such theorizing is not only often inaccurate, but it works to create a further division between the disabled and the able-bodied. Some of the novels I study in this thesis begin to contradict connections made between physical disability and psychological or mental pathology. They also anticipate many other concerns that have become important to modern-day Disability Studies: for example, Tobin Siebers has also suggested that one reason able-bodied people find disabled people threatening is because the disability poses a threat to their own sense of self-integration (Siebers, 46). This is an insight that is explored in the sensation novels *The Dead Secret*, *The Law and the Lady*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*, as will be made apparent in my discussions of these novels.

Many of the questions examined in modern-day disability theory are extremely similar to ideological disputes about physical and mental disabilities and illnesses that were taking place during the nineteenth century, such as whether the sensorially or physically disabled are doomed to develop mental pathologies, whether the disabled can live happy lives, and whether the disabled should attempt to hide or to treat their disabilities. The most nuanced literary discussions of such disputes took place in sensation fiction, and the degree to which Collins and Braddon's ideas were challenging and progressive may be hinted at by the fact that some of the ideas about physical and mental disability expressed by them seem very similar to the concerns and realizations of the twentieth-century disability rights movement and of disability theory.

²⁸ Mitchell states that most disabled characters in literature are disqualified "from possessing a shared social identity" and are hardly ever identified "as a disenfranchised cultural constituency" (Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis", 23).

David T. Mitchell points out that literary narratives often present disability as “an alien terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 23). This is certainly what is promised and delivered by many of Wilkie Collins’s depictions of disability. However, Collins’s representations of disability do not work to marginalize the disabled character. Rather, he almost always demystifies whichever disability is represented: Collins’s method is to take the reader inside a disabled character’s psychology and emotions, and inside their social world. Therefore, while a reader may begin the novel thinking of a particular disability as an ‘alien terrain’, they are likely to end the novel feeling more attuned to people with that disability and more inclined to see them as very similar to themselves. Braddon’s novel *The Trail of the Serpent* – also discussed in this thesis – has a similar effect.

Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon engaged in scientifically and sociologically-based approaches to representing disability, rather than merely depicting straightforward and sentimental representations of ‘cripples’. They asked interesting questions about how society theorizes madness and stigmatizes those who seem physically or mentally non-normative, and by doing so they mounted a challenge to the discourses of disability that were prevalent during the mid-nineteenth century. The most apparent and significant difference between depictions of the disabled in novels by Collins and Braddon and the way that the disabled were usually depicted in more mainstream Victorian literature is that the innovative representations by Collins and Braddon move away from comprehending and representing disability according to the ‘medical’ model of disability that dominated Victorian thought. This was a model that emphasised disability as ‘impairment’ and saw disabled people as ‘deformed’, ‘debilitated’, or ‘defective’, or as medical specimens. Nor do Collins and Braddon fall into the trap of sentimentalizing the disabled and making them figures of pity and charity. Instead, Collins and Braddon conceptualize and represent disability in ways that prefigure a more ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ model of disability – the same kind of model most disability scholars adopt today. By regarding disability as a condition that is at least partly sociologically created and perpetuated, by questioning the boundaries and differences between ‘able-bodied’ and ‘disabled’, and by suggesting that physical and mental disability does not preclude happiness, they sought to lessen the stigmas attached to disability and to represent it as an ordinary and acceptable part of our world, rather than as an isolating, painful ‘affliction’.

SECTION ONE:

WILKIE COLLINS AND DISABLED IDENTITIES

Introduction to disability in the novels of Wilkie Collins.

‘Disability by cultural definition makes visible that which will not be disappeared: the body and its *sensations* and needs’ (Stoddard Holmes, “Preface”, *Fictions of Affliction*, x; emphasis added).

Wilkie Collins’s various interests in science, coupled with his desire for social justice, led him to produce some of the most ground-breaking and unsettling portrayals of disability in Victorian culture. Collins chose to depict characters with disabilities in a large number of his texts, and often focused his novels directly upon these disabled figures. Utilizing tropes common to traditional modes of representation of the disabled, Collins often interrogates or overturns sentimental and ableist modes of representation of the disabled, revealing them as inadequate, inaccurate in their portrayals of the disabled, or relying on hegemonical ideology. Literary critics have begun to pay increasing attention to some of Wilkie Collins’s portrayals of characters with disabilities in recent years, yet many of his portrayals of disability remain unexamined or under-examined.

Scrutiny of Collins’s fiction reveals that throughout his career he was intrigued by many issues relating to the sensory, psychological, and practical life experiences of disabled people and to the social, medical, and literary representation of the disabled. A large number of the issues that Collins’s fiction raises about disability are precisely those issues that the modern day practice of disability studies now engages with. Collins’s novels should become of increasing importance to the field of disability studies, as his writing represents some of the nineteenth century’s most challenging, yet most accurate (in terms of the scientific knowledge displayed throughout) literary discussions of disability. The disability scholar, David T. Mitchell has noted that throughout history, almost all cultures have viewed disability as a “problem in need of a solution” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 15). Collins’s depictions of disability are unusual because such views of disability are very seldom expressed, or if such ideas are raised, they are ultimately rejected.

HIDE AND SEEK (1854):

Hide and Seek is one of Wilkie Collins's earliest novels, published in three volumes by Richard Bentley in 1854.²⁹ It is the first Collins novel in which a character with a disability plays a major role. Collins places a young deaf and dumb woman, Madonna, in two pivotal roles: as romantic heroine, and as the focus of a mystery. Collins's representation of Madonna is significant in the history of literary depictions of disability, because it is the earliest detailed representation of a deaf-mute person in the British novel, and certainly the first such depiction in a nineteenth-century cultural form that might claim any scientific accuracy. His representation of Madonna features a combination of a traditional 'sentimental' approach toward representing disability and a more self-consciously 'naturalistic' approach that focuses on Madonna's psychological life.

Throughout his career, Wilkie Collins was often to engage in innovative forms of writing, and in *Hide and Seek* he creates a disabled character who possesses individual subjectivity and agency; an unusual achievement in mid-nineteenth-century literature. In my discussion of *Hide and Seek* I shall explain how Collins utilized a non-fictional resource, John Kitto's *The Lost Senses*, as a template for his novel, while also examining some of the gendered aspects of Collins's depiction of deaf-mutism, and ways that Collins responded to debates over the education of the deaf.

Collins was highly aware of the innovative nature of *Hide and Seek*; in an explanatory note that accompanied the 1861 version of the novel,³⁰ he makes the following statement:

I do not know that any attempt has yet been made in English fiction to draw the character of a 'Deaf Mute,' simply and exactly after nature – or, in other words, to exhibit the peculiar effects produced by the loss of the senses of hearing and speaking on the disposition of the person so afflicted ("Note to Chapter VII", *Hide and Seek*, 431).³¹

Even though Collins had realised very early on that his plan to write about a deaf and mute character was innovative, he was nevertheless surprised when he was almost unable to locate *any* reliable sources of information about deafness or deaf-mutism. While Collins located one previous fictional depiction of deaf-mutism, this proved unhelpful because the character portrayed only *pretended* to have such a disability (431).³²

²⁹ *Hide and Seek* did not appear in a serialized form. It was first published in June 1854, in three volumes, by Richard Bentley and Co., London. See <http://www.wilkie-collins.info/books_hide_seek.htm>

³⁰ The 1861 version is the first 'one volume' edition.

³¹ The edition quoted from is the 1993 Oxford World's Classics edition.

³² Collins refers to Sir Walter Scott's *Peveril of the Peak*, which features a character named Fenella, who "assumes deafness and dumbness". Collins also explains that stage depictions of mutism had been

However, just as Collins was about to give up his attempt to write about deaf-mutism, he became aware of a memoir by Dr. John Kitto, entitled *The Lost Senses: Deafness and Blindness* (1845). This text contains detailed information about the author's personal experiences of deafness and mutism,³³ and Collins came to rely on this memoir for a substantial amount of information regarding the psychological effects that sensory deprivation could have on a person.

It is apparent that Collins believed it possible to create a realistic portrayal of the lifestyle and psychology of a deaf-mute girl, but only provided that he based her characterization on facts about the physical mechanics of deafness and mutism and the psychological effects of these disabilities. He was not prepared to simply guess at how a deaf-mute person might experience or perceive the world. Hence in *Hide and Seek* Collins coupled information gained from *The Lost Senses* with his own imaginative ideas. The resulting novel has something of a hybrid nature as it was written with the purpose of awakening sympathy for the deaf-mute, while also aiming to achieve a high level of mimesis in its representation of the somatic and psychological effects of deaf-mutism.

One remarkable aspect of *Hide and Seek* is its movement away from the traditionally sentimental and melodramatic methods of representing the disabled. Collins does occasionally make use of a sentimental mode when evoking Madonna's disabilities, but his representation of Madonna largely focuses on depicting Madonna's cognitive processes; instances of sentimentality are overshadowed by the number of scenes that discuss the practical difficulties Madonna faces or that feature detailed inspections of Madonna's somatic experiences and psychology. This represents Collins's attempt to depict Madonna in a 'naturalistic' way. This combination of approaches in Madonna's characterization means that the reader is able to witness Collins in the process of thinking through some of his early responses to disability.

unrealistic because the "dumb people" always seem "able to hear what is said to them" (Collins, "Note to Chapter VII", *Hide and Seek*, 431). Mary Wilson Carpenter notes that Collins's claim to have written the first novel about a deaf-mute appears to be correct (Carpenter, *Health, Medicine and Society*, 125). She states that during the early Victorian period deaf-mutism was thought of as a particularly rare condition, and that "everywhere in Victorian literature in which the experience of deafness is described, one finds this sense of the newness of the subject" (Carpenter, 121-2).

³³ Mutism was often referred to as "dumbness" during the Victorian period, but this term is now obsolete and deemed offensive by the deaf community. Its use is appropriate in a Victorian context, but I shall generally use the term "mute", since it is used by Collins and still used today. However, it is often now also regarded as inaccurate to refer to non-speaking deaf people as "mute", since many deaf people can speak but choose not to; the terms "non-verbal" or "non-oral" are preferred by many in the deaf community. I shall refer to Madonna as "mute" when referring to Collins's novel, but use the term "non-verbal" in my discussions of modern deaf culture.

We are first introduced to Madonna when she is in her early twenties and living in the home of a rather unsuccessful artist, Valentine Blyth. At this point in the novel, the narrator withholds information about Madonna, refusing to reveal her real name or parentage. But while Madonna's hidden parentage is sought for throughout the novel, providing the basis for the 'mystery' of the novel's subtitle, "The Mystery of Mary Grice", *Hide and Seek*'s greatest exploration of 'mystery', lies in the insights it provides into the life of someone who is deaf and mute.

After first introducing us to Madonna in Valentine's studio, the novel suddenly leaps thirteen years backwards in time from 1851 to 1838. This is with the purpose of revealing how Valentine first met the mysterious young Madonna. Valentine rescued Madonna from a travelling circus when she was very young.³⁴ Madonna is ten years old when she meets Valentine. She is an orphan and is totally disempowered due to her youth, her poverty, and her lack of an effective guardian. She has been forced to take part in circus routines by Mr Jubber, a tyrannical circus director. Madonna has recently fallen from a horse during a circus performance, subsequently losing her hearing and her ability to speak (91-92). Undeterred by this, Jubber has begun to exploit Madonna's disability by exhibiting her as:

"THE MYSTERIOUS FOUNDLING! ... TOTALLY DEAF AND DUMB!" (56).

Madonna cannot protest against her exploitation as she literally has *no voice*. Neither can Madonna stop Jubber from telling the circus audience that even though she is "deaf and dumb", she is "in excellent health and spirits" (60); she can only counter this claim via the sorrowful looks she directs to members of the audience. Jubber attempts to disguise his exploitation of Madonna's disability by presenting the performance as a "conjuring" show. He profits from the pathos that her appearance evokes, as the audience's response to the show largely consists of their feeling sorry for Madonna and therefore giving her money. General feelings of sympathy prompt the audience members to speak kindly to Madonna and to reject Jubber's suggestion that they should subject her to tests of her deafness (60). However, Jubber's reassurances about Madonna's happiness are actually motivated by his wish to deflect any audience suspicion that Madonna is

³⁴ *Hide and Seek* was published in the same year as Dickens's *Hard Times* began to appear in serial publication. *Hard Times* also features a travelling circus that puts on equestrian performances, and Catherine Peters has suggested that Collins and Dickens "were remembering the same circus act" (Peters, "Introduction", *Hide and Seek*, xiv). Collins's novel was completed before *Hard Times* had begun its serialization; Norman Donaldson suggests that this could be an early example of Dickens being influenced by Collins's writing (Donaldson, "Introduction", *Hide and Seek*, ix).

mistreated. Despite this, various members of the audience correctly guess that Jubber secretly beats Madonna (67).³⁵

It is in the novel's first circus scene that Collins most explicitly promotes a sentimental view of Madonna. She appears to be miserable and desperately needs someone to intervene. Collins then provides Madonna with the perfect man to carry out her rescue, as Valentine Blyth stumbles upon the circus and watches Madonna's performance. Once Valentine is in place in the circus audience, the narrator of *Hide and Seek* suddenly launches a rhetorical outburst that emphasizes Madonna's helplessness and pitifulness:

Ah, woeful sight! so lovely, yet so piteous to look on! Shall she never hear kindly human voices, the song of birds, the pleasant murmur of the trees again? Are all the sweet sounds that sing of happiness to childhood, silent for ever to *her*? ... the young, tender life be for ever a speechless thing, shut up in dumbness from the free world of voices? Oh! Angel of judgment! hast thou snatched her hearing and her speech from this little child, to abandon her in helpless affliction to such profanation as she now undergoes? Oh, Spirit of mercy! how long thy white-winged feet have tarried on their way to this innocent sufferer, to this lost lamb that cannot cry to the fold for help! Lead, ah, lead her tenderly to such shelter as she has never yet found for herself! (*Hide and Seek*, 61).³⁶

The adoption of a sentimental mode was a traditional way of representing disability. However, in *Hide and Seek* it occurs so suddenly as to be disturbing; it seems calculated to provoke reader distress and to elicit maximum sympathy for Madonna. The narration also suggests that an audience could respond to Madonna's disability from within a religious framework; she is a lost sheep who needs guidance, or angelic protection.

Because the abandonment of any pretence to objectivity is so abrupt and the adoption of an emotional tone so intense, it might be possible to read the paragraphs representing Madonna as pathetic, afflicted and in need of help as a parody of melodramatic, overwrought, and catastrophizing responses to disability in literature and drama. However, the narrator's lapse from objectivity into a distressed personal commentary about the pathos of disability seems a self-reflexive indication of the power that disability may have.³⁷

³⁵ It is difficult to establish to what degree Madonna's powerlessness can be attributed to her position as a child, and how much is a result of her sensory disabilities. In this scene Collins tangles the emotional effect of reading about child abuse with the affective suggestiveness of disability.

³⁶ In *Fictions of Affliction* Martha Stoddard Holmes looks at some of the same scenes from *Hide and Seek* as I do throughout this chapter (see *Fictions of Affliction*, 76-80). We do, however, make differing observations about them.

³⁷ The method of representing Madonna in this scene is quite different from that Collins adopts in later scenes. It is possible that Collins uses this sentimental tone without irony; this kind of sentimental

But Madonna's situation and appearance also have a strong effect on Valentine Blyth. Valentine, an excitable and sensitive character, responds to Madonna primarily out of compassion, but also as a lover of beauty. His initial response to Madonna is described in wholly sensory terms, as Valentine's sense-perception of Madonna prompts various physiological effects. The narrator stresses that Valentine "appeared suddenly to *lose his senses* the minute he set *eyes* on the deaf and dumb child" (60; my emphasis). When Valentine sees Madonna, he begins to jump up and down and to talk uncontrollably. Losing awareness of anything but Madonna, he temporarily blocks off his hearing, seeming to not hear the crowd, who demand that he be quiet. His instinctual response to Madonna is so overwhelming that he not only experiences sensory stimulation, but some form of vasoconstriction:

Was there something in the eager sympathy of his eyes as they met hers, which spoke to the little lonely heart in the sole language that could ever reach it? Did the child, with the quick instinct of the deaf and dumb, read his compassionate disposition, his pity and longing to help her, in his expression at that moment? It might have been so ... He saw the small fingers trembling as they held the cards; he saw the delicate little shoulders and the poor frail neck and chest bedizened with tawdry mock jewelry and spangles; he saw the innocent young face, whose pure beauty no soil of stage paint could disfigure, with the smile still on the parted lips, but with a patient forlornness in the sad blue eyes, as if the seeing-sense that was left, mourned always for the hearing and speaking senses that were gone -- he marked all these things in an instant, and felt that his heart was sinking as he looked. A dimness stole over his sight; a suffocating sensation oppressed his breathing (*Hide and Seek*, 62).

As he scans Madonna's figure, Valentine notices the smile on her lips and the forlornness in her eyes, and feels that his heart is sinking. His looking at her prompts a tsunami of various emotions: sympathy, empathy, and all the physiological markers of attraction. Indeed, Valentine's response to Madonna is so intense that, although he does later return to help Madonna, at first he actually *runs from* her, finding the pathos of her disability and her situation too intense to bear. Rather than suggest that such strong emotions have a deleterious effect on Valentine, however, Collins shows how they can lead to altruism: these emotions and sensory experiences prompt Valentine to save Madonna from the circus. Collins's representation of the workings of empathy emphasises how visual cues prompt the physiological processes that lead Valentine to

representation of illness, disability, and imperilled childhood was traditional. However, even at this early stage of his career, Collins was also a very self-aware and self-reflexive writer.

realise and respond to Madonna's distress. In turn, Madonna seems to read Valentine's face, and through it, detect his compassionate disposition.

This melodramatic scene demonstrates that Madonna's body, a site of apparent "affliction", has the power to affect the bodies of other characters in the novel.³⁸ It also provides an example of the sympathetic responses to Madonna's disability expected from the novel's readers, and makes Valentine's intervention into Madonna's life appear justified.

At the same time, these circus scenes seem to weigh up the positive and negative aspects of sentimental representations of disability and sentimental responses to it. Jubber's advertisement for the show features a deliberate appeal to the potential audience's ability to feel for others. His advertisement describes Madonna as a "Marvel of Nature" and emphasises the "melancholy circumstances" of her accident, revealing that "She was supposed to be dead". It asserts that "little particulars" about Madonna would appeal greatly "to an Intelligent, a Sympathetic, and a Benevolent Public" (57). The advertisement therefore appears to encourage the potential audience to imagine Madonna's feelings about her predicament, yet it does so in an exploitative way. From the information provided in Jubber's poster, Valentine instinctively recognizes that Madonna is being objectified, and he finds the advertisement grotesque. It seems that both Valentine and the narrator are angered by "that dastard insensibility to all decent respect for human suffering which could feast itself on the spectacle of calamity paraded for hire" (57-58).

Hide and Seek therefore suggests that the people who deliberately attend a show that turns a disabled girl into a performer might not be displaying "humanity", but might in fact be *inhumane*, and taking part in Madonna's exploitation since they either ignore or enjoy the fact that the deaf-mute child is being made a spectacle. The circus audience expresses pity for Madonna, yet their feelings of pity for Madonna's suffering seem gratuitous since they are not helpful to Madonna. The circus scene therefore suggests that there may be some negative consequences to regarding the disabled through a framework of pathos and sentimentality.

Madonna is finally saved by Valentine, who is, and as his last name, Blyth, suggests, happy and loving. Early in the novel, Valentine is revealed as someone who already

³⁸ The novel often scrutinizes the somatic sensations that are produced in the bodies of the characters who are around Madonna. There is a similar somatic response when Mat Marksman first meets Madonna (250-51). This has an interesting correlation with the idea that sensation novels could have a physiological effect on their readers.

cares for an invalid; his wife stays in bed, due to a spinal condition. While we can not assume that someone who cares for an invalid always does so out of compassion or is necessarily a compassionate person, it is clear from the textual context that Collins provides this detail as proof of Valentine's kindness, faithfulness, and diligence. It is also mentioned, early in the novel, that Valentine and his wife have longed for a child. By helping Madonna, Valentine is simultaneously able to show his goodness, acquire a child, acquire a companion for his invalid wife, and acquire something beautiful.

From this point onward, *Hide and Seek* abandons its emphasis on the sentimental or abusive responses that Madonna receives from others, and instead begins to focus intently on Madonna's experiences of various psychological and somatic states, emphasising both her high degree of positive adjustment to her disability, and some unusual psychological consequences of it. Collins's narrative thus maintains reader sympathy for Madonna, but avoids perpetuating any view of her as a victim. Paradoxically, even though Collins attempts a naturalistic portrait of Madonna that emphasises her similarity with able-bodied people, his novel also posits the idea that she holds extra interest precisely because of her disability. After Madonna's rescue from the circus, the narrator abandons direct appeals for reader sympathy for Madonna; instead sympathetic interest in Madonna is generated indirectly via the novel's revelations of Madonna's thoughts and its descriptions of her use of sign language: revelations that also transform her into a speaking subject.

Collins's use of the work of Dr. John Kitto.

Collins's depiction of Madonna differs from earlier theatrical representations of deaf-mutism because it shows how her sensory disability affects her cognition, her emotions, and the way she uses her remaining senses, as well as depicting her efforts to communicate with her hearing friends and acquaintances. Much of Collins's success in depicting such processes with apparent accuracy is due to his use of information from Dr. John Kitto's memoir *The Lost Senses*. John Kitto³⁹ had been a stonemason's assistant. When about twelve years old, while stepping from a ladder onto a roof, he lost his footing and fell thirty-five feet to the cobblestones below (Kitto, *The Lost Senses*, 10). He subsequently lost his hearing, and this hearing loss affected the quality of his speech. Many years later, Kitto wrote *The Lost Senses*, which, rather than being a general

³⁹ Kitto was also a famous biblical scholar, and Elisabeth Gitter notes that he "was the one deaf man who was well known in England and the United States during the nineteenth century" (Gitter, "Deaf-Mutes and Heroines In the Victorian Era", 194, see note 3).

autobiography, relates facts, incidents and ideas related to Kitto's experiences of disability (Kitto, 6). It appears to be the first book-length memoir about disability ever written by a deaf person.

In a note written to accompany the 1861 edition of *Hide and Seek* Collins acknowledges his indebtedness to Kitto.^{40 41} Almost every medical detail that Collins supplies about Madonna's loss of hearing and difficulty with speech, and a large proportion of the information given about the psychological effects of her disabilities, are derived from information supplied by Kitto. Like Kitto, Madonna is not congenitally deaf or pre-lingually deaf. She becomes deaf after acquiring some language ability, and as the result of a fall that presumably causes damage to the inner ear or nerves (the doctor who examines her suggests that her auditory nerve is damaged, but that her brain is not (92)).

The information gained from Kitto is incorporated into *Hide and Seek* very skilfully and seamlessly; it is likely that anyone who had not read *The Lost Senses* before reading *Hide and Seek* might have remained unaware of its influence on the novel. In order to demonstrate how Collins fused information gathered from *The Lost Senses* with his own ideas, I shall make a comparison of the scene in Kitto's memoir in which Kitto wakes after his fall from the roof, to find out that he is deaf, with the corresponding scene in *Hide and Seek* where Madonna is told that she is deaf.

John Kitto describes his realization that he was deaf in the following way:

I was very slow in learning that my hearing was entirely gone. The unusual stillness of all things was grateful to me in my utter exhaustion ... I ascribed it to the unusual care and success of my friends in preserving silence around me. I saw them talking indeed to one another, and thought that ... they spoke in whispers, because I heard them not. The truth was revealed to me in consequence of my solicitude about the book which had so much interested me in the day of my fall ...

'Why do you not speak?' I cried; 'pray let me have the book.'
This seemed to create some confusion; and at length some one, more clever than the rest, hit upon the happy expedient of writing upon a slate, that the book had been reclaimed by the owner ...

⁴⁰ In his "Note to Chapter VII" Collins calls *The Lost Senses* "my authority for most of those traits in Madonna's character which are especially and immediately connected with the deprivation from which she is represented as suffering" (431). Kitto makes an appearance in *Hide and Seek* as an 'off-stage' character. When Madonna is visited by a specialist shortly after her accident, the specialist says: "'there's just the same expression in her face that remember seeing in a mason's boy – a patient of mine – who fell off a ladder, and lost his hearing altogether by the shock'" (*Hide and Seek*, 96).

⁴¹ Catherine Peters suggests that Collins may have become familiar with *The Lost Senses* through Dickens's recommendation (Peters, "Introduction", *Hide and Seek*, xviii). While Peters provides no solid evidence for this, Dickens was in correspondence with Kitto in 1850 ("Introduction", xviii).

‘But,’ I said in great astonishment, ‘why do you write to me, why not speak? Speak, speak.’

Those who stood around the bed exchanged significant looks of concern, and the writer soon displayed upon his slate the awful words – ‘YOU ARE DEAF.’

Did not this utterly crush me? By no means. In my then weakened condition nothing like this could affect me. Besides, I was a child; and to a child the full extent of such a calamity could not be at once apparent... It was left for time to show me the sad realities of the condition to which I was reduced (Kitto, *The Lost Senses*, 11-12).

We can see that the scene in *Hide and Seek* when Madonna wakes up after her accident uses information provided by *The Lost Senses*: Madonna also immediately tries to speak, and also accuses her attendants of whispering. However, rather than being so tired as to be unaffected by her realization that she is deaf, Madonna is bewildered and astonished:

‘What’s the matter?’ she says, in the same sort of strange unnatural voice again. We tried to pacify her, but only made her worse. ‘Why do you keep on whispering?’ she asks. ‘Why don’t you speak out loud so that I can --,’ and then she stopped, seemingly in a sort of helpless fright and bewilderment. She tried to get up in bed, and her face turned red all over ... ‘We must quiet her at all hazards,’ says the doctor, ‘or she’ll excite herself into another attack of fever. She feels what’s the matter with her, but don’t understand it; and I’m going to tell her by means of this paper. It’s a risk,’ he says, writing down on the paper in large letters, *You Are Deaf*; ‘but I must try all I can do for her ears immediately; and this will prepare her,’ says he, going to the bed, and holding the paper before her eyes.

She shrank back on the pillow, as still as death, the instant she saw it; but didn’t cry, and looked more puzzled and astonished, I should say, than distressed. But she was breathing dreadful quick – I felt that, as I stooped down and kissed her. ‘She’s too young,’ says the doctor, ‘to know what the extent of her calamity really is. You stop here and keep her quiet till I come back’ (*Hide and Seek*, 95).

Collins’s Madonna, just like John Kitto, finds out about her deafness when someone at his bedside writes the words “YOU ARE DEAF” onto a slate; there is also a repeated mention of the idea that a child might not immediately understand their “calamity”. However, there are key differences between the texts; Collins appears to emphasise Madonna’s gender or, at least, to stress her emotionality. Madonna is told about her disability by a benevolent doctor and is attended by her loving guardian Mrs Peckover. Madonna seems to understand something of the nature of her problem *before* she is told she is deaf, and due to her emotional response the Doctor is very concerned with keeping her calm. However, in *The Lost Senses*, the onlookers at Kitto’s bedside remain

anonymous, and the child Kitto is so ill and stunned, that he does not comprehend the situation until someone explains it to him. Collins not only infuses a greater degree of emotionality into the narrative, but also a greater degree of somatic emphasis, as he focuses on Madonna's physiological responses to the news: Madonna feels "helpless fright and bewilderment"; "her face turned red all over", "she shrank back", and "she was breathing awful quick" (95).

Collins likely felt that reading Kitto's book provided him with the kind of background knowledge needed to affirm his dedication to achieving 'naturalism' in his work, and that the knowledge gained from such a memoir would lend scientific and anecdotal authority to ideas explored in *Hide and Seek*.⁴² Importantly, Collins was not prepared to create a deaf-mute character by relying only on his own imagination to guess at a deaf-mute person's probable feelings and perceptions. Collins's decision to represent Madonna in a way that was scientifically informed may reflect the public's growing interest in science, but its main motivation is Collins's own great interest in the sensory and cognitive processes involved in physical disability.

However, despite his strong reliance on Kitto's writing,⁴³ Collins does not simply repeat Kitto's experiences, but has his own aims in mind which sometimes cause him to diverge quite forcefully from the details that Kitto's work provides about his treatment and rehabilitation, or the conclusions that Kitto reaches about deafness. The main motivation behind these divergences is to assert that Madonna may live happily even if she always remains deaf and mute.

First, Collins's novel differs from *The Lost Senses* in the gender, age, and the personality of the child who becomes disabled. Madonna's emotionality, affectionateness, and reliance on her visual senses are all stressed – elements of characterisation that seem to stress her femininity. Kitto's main concerns even when young are reading and writing, and his later interests in business and academia seem to emphasise his masculinity. The

⁴² In responses to critics, and sometimes in prefatory notes, Collins often referred to preparatory reading he had conducted or to letters he had received from doctors and scientists. By referring to such authorities, Collins hoped to prove the realism of his characterizations of the disabled (for example, to prove that he has modelled them "after nature"; see Collins's "Note to Chapter VII").

⁴³ Mrs Peckover describes the treatments and tests given to Madonna (see *Hide and Seek*, 96). These replicate almost exactly the treatments Kitto describes: "they poured into my tortured ears various infusions, hot and cold; they bled me, they blistered me, leeched me, physicked me; and at last, they put a watch between my teeth" (Kitto, 15). Later in the novel Valentine Blyth takes Madonna to a doctor in London, for further testing and advice. The doctor states that Madonna might be able to regain her speech, imperfectly, if she is placed with an experienced teacher of the deaf and dumb (117). These follow-ups with doctors are similar to Kitto's experiences: six months after Kitto was deafened, a different doctor told him that "by a different course at the commencement, my hearing might have been restored" (Kitto, 12). Kitto also mentions electrical experiments on his ears "some years after" (Kitto, 13).

difference in the gender of the child represented seems to be linked to the way that Collins effects a significant change from the tenor of Kitto's narrative. Kitto's narrative is dry, detached, and often seemingly unfeeling, despite Kitto's assertion that he regards deafness as a terrible affliction. However, despite his often negative attitude toward deafness, Kitto never seeks to elicit pity for himself. In contrast, Collins *Hide and Seek* is much more emotionally affecting, because the reader is encouraged to form an emotional connection with Madonna.

Of course, *Hide and Seek*'s change of tenor probably also reflects the change of format from non-fiction to fiction. Reading *Hide and Seek* in tandem with *The Lost Senses* provides a fascinating insight into the way that Collins incorporated factual information into his writing, and by observing which details Collins chose to include from Kitto's work, and which he left out, one can also deduce which details about the experience of disability most interested Collins, and the kinds of responses he most desired to provoke in his readers.

Most significantly, Collins's work differs from Kitto's in terms of its prevailing attitude toward disability. Kitto structures his memoir as the story of his transcendence of his disability, even as he suggests that his disability may have been a blessing in disguise. Kitto tells the reader that he would probably never have become a famous author *had he not been disabled* (see 88-92). His disability became the driving motivation of his teenage and adult life: his goal was not to achieve something that would be considered remarkable "for a deaf man", but to achieve things that would be thought impressive accomplishments *even if he were able-bodied* (Kitto, 83).⁴⁴

Disability's relation to beauty and gender.

Another observable difference between *The Lost Senses* and *Hide and Seek* is the persistent emphasis that *Hide and Seek* places on Madonna's beauty. Valentine Blyth's response to Madonna is partly inspired by his sense of aesthetic rapture when he first looks at her, a feeling that leads him to exclaim: "'Devotional beauty'", "Fra Angelico's angels", and "Giotto and the cherubs" (60). He soon associates her with the Madonna di San Sisto of Raphael (the nickname of "Madonna" replaces her given name of "Mary").

⁴⁴ Martha Stoddard Holmes concludes that Kitto derives some gratification from emphasizing the misery of his affliction and his transcendence of it: he possesses the masochistic "identity of colossal sufferer". Kitto manages to position deafness as "an extreme loss, a moral blight, a professional disqualification – and a triumphal compensation here on Earth" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 164).

The emphasis on Madonna's beauty may be included in order to endear Madonna to readers, and to enhance her acceptability as a romantic heroine.

Likewise, the doctor attending Madonna feels compelled to tell her "you're the prettiest little girl I ever saw in my life" (*Hide and Seek*, 96), suggesting that his emotional response to her deafness may be inseparable from his response to her beauty. However, in *The Lost Senses* John Kitto never places any emphasis on his own appearance, or on its relation to his disability, and it is clear that any sympathy extended toward Kitto, even when he is a little boy, has nothing to do with his degree of physical beauty or cuteness. One may conclude that this difference is linked to the respective genders of the protagonists of each work, and that the issue of physical appearance may be a lesser consideration when it comes to social responses to males with disabilities than it is when the disabled person is female.

It is also true that *Hide and Seek* encompasses a significant side-plot about art and painting, which is partly autobiographical, and Collins does not simply make Madonna beautiful, but makes her resemble a painting. The novel, in general, is very concerned with visual perception.⁴⁵ Once more, the emphasis on the visual may be influenced by information provided by John Kitto, as Kitto recounts that after he became deaf, he began to take an instinctual interest in art (Kitto, 58-61).

However, it could also be the case that Collins was prepared to buck tradition by portraying a heroine with a disability, but not yet prepared to defy the requirement that a novelistic heroine be beautiful. Collins's emphasis on Madonna's beauty may therefore be read in varying ways: it could be read negatively as possibly suggesting that Madonna's beauty is linked to her silence, or that her silence makes her angelic. But it could also be read more positively, as recognising that a disabled woman may still be beautiful.

***Hide and Seek's* engagement with the 'oralist' debate.**

The issue of Madonna's gender also appears to acquire relevance in the novel's management of her refusal to try to vocalise after she has lost her hearing. Madonna never regains the ability to speak. When Madonna speaks for the first time after her accident, Mrs Peckover accuses her of "trying to imitate Mr Jubber's gruff voice" (94). When Madonna then realises that her speech has begun to sound strange – and even

⁴⁵ In 1853, immediately before the composition of *Hide and Seek*, Collins was engaged in a tour of Italy, during which he visited centres such as Florence, famous for Italian Renaissance art (see Peters, "Introduction", *Hide and Seek*, xi).

masculine, she feels embarrassed and becomes intensely reluctant to speak. The novel also mentions another probable source for her reluctance: Madonna experiences the uncanny feeling of knowing that she is talking but being unable to hear “the sound of her own voice” (97). While the novel explicitly mentions that there could be a possibility of Madonna learning to speak again, instead of attempting to regain her speech, Madonna turns to other methods of communication, such as writing, using the “finger alphabet” (a simplified Victorian form of sign language), and constructing her own personalized system of signs.

In *The Lost Senses* John Kitto mentions his own initial reluctance to vocalise after he became deaf. John Kitto explains that at first he continued to speak after he became deaf, but was told by others that his voice had become unusually “guttural”. He relates harrowing stories of receiving shocked looks from people on the street, who stared at him as though he were making sounds “not of this earth” (Kitto, 27). Therefore, while Kitto notes that being deaf does not automatically mean that one will be physically incapable of speech (Kitto, 20), he also gives the reader a strong sense of the self-consciousness and “moral reluctance” he felt about speaking, and he admits that for several years he allowed others to assume that he could not vocalise (Kitto, 19-20).

However, Kitto did eventually re-learn oral speech. But it is significant that he only did so as the result of relentless peer pressure. While he was on a boat cruise, some of his acquaintances “entered into a conspiracy” to refuse to acknowledge him unless he communicated via the spoken word. Kitto appears to look back on this peer pressure as an example of helpful tough love that forced him to make “great progress” with his tongue (Kitto, 22), and he expresses pride that he managed to regain close to his previous level of articulation (Kitto, 21-22).

Such details obviously interested Collins, but while Collins makes Madonna share Kitto’s initial reluctance to vocalize, he never shows her successfully re-learning how to speak. Soon after the accident that leaves Madonna deaf, a doctor tells Mrs Peckover that Madonna is already losing the wish to speak. He warns Mrs Peckover that if she allows Madonna to communicate without speaking, “she would be dumb as well as deaf”. He advises her to force Madonna to use her voice: “Don’t give her dinner, unless she asks for it. Treat her severely in that way, poor little soul, because it’s for her own good” (97-98). However, Mrs Peckover does not carry out the doctor’s instructions; every time Madonna looks sad or apprehensive about speaking, Mrs Peckover pities her and allows her to communicate via writing. As a result, Madonna is soon unable to speak at all (99).

Later, *Hide and Seek* sets up a situation that *could* lead to Madonna's re-learning speech, only to subvert it. Shortly after Madonna loses her hearing, a doctor mentions the possibility of Madonna learning to speak again if she attends a particular school for the deaf and dumb. However, such schooling is represented as "tedious" and "uncertain" (117) and Madonna never enrolls at the school or engages any specialised teacher. Instead of attempting to regain her oral speech, Madonna chooses to write, to use the "finger alphabet" (a simplified form of sign language, in which individual letters are "finger spelt") and more complex sign language, and to construct her own personalized system of signs or gestures.

It is apparent that in the 1830s and 1840s John Kitto was surrounded by people who assumed that it was both possible and ideal for him to re-learn how to speak. Collins's decision to depart from Kitto's example may therefore initially seem surprising. However, it is probable that Collins was reacting against the more negative side of trends in the education of the deaf. The critic Elisabeth Gitter reveals that in the mid to late-Victorian period, as a cultural preference for 'oralism' (having deaf people speak) developed, "the sign language of the deaf ... came under increasingly acrimonious attack". Oralism was promoted as being a far superior form of communication to sign; it was suggested that sign was a "low" and unsophisticated language (Gitter, "Deaf Mutes and Heroines in the Victorian Era", 179).

Therefore, not only were deaf people "taught to vocalise", but they were increasingly forced to give up sign, despite representations from "the advocates of Sign language" that "Sign was the preferred language of the proverbially deaf" (Gitter, *ibid.*, 179). Although *Hide and Seek* appeared before these developments reached their highest degree of controversy, it was written in the context of a society which believed that deafness and mutism could be 'corrected' or diminished, and which was soon to become increasingly hostile to forms of sign language. *Hide and Seek*, however, is resistant to the idea that Madonna should attempt to hide or diminish her disability in this way, or adopt a form of communication that has become alien to her.

But, it appears that the growing pressure to take part in an 'oralist' culture was predominantly oriented toward males, with not as much pressure to speak being exerted on females. Elisabeth Gitter reveals that "deafness during the Victorian period was almost exclusively personified in a number of popular deaf-mute women who were widely celebrated in inspirational biographies and religious tracts" (Gitter, 179, note 3). Madonna's gender may therefore be relevant in this regard, while Kitto's eventual desire

to speak may also lie in expectations linked to his gender. He describes how he was greatly disadvantaged in the business world when he could not readily conduct interviews with associates, or when he had to attempt business transactions via written notes (Kitto, 93-95). This suggests that it may have been deemed more appropriate for men to re-learn speech because of professional considerations or because men were often heads of households. However, one should also note that Kitto states frankly that he “abominated” signs (Kitto, 20), and that he not only criticizes the ambiguity of the finger alphabet, but associates it with women, noting that not many men have thought acquiring such language to be worth their attention (Kitto, 99-109).

Collins’s representation of Madonna’s deaf-mutism was likely affected by the arguments between those who supported the idea of an ‘oralist’ deaf culture versus a ‘manual’ (signing) culture. It is possible that his decision to let Madonna continue to use various ‘signs’, and sometimes sign language, rather than to speak, simply mirrors the fact that many deaf women did not re-learn oral communication. The detail that on Madonna’s initial attempt to speak again, her voice sounds quite deep and masculine, may also be significant. Although apparently suggested by information supplied by Kitto, in Madonna’s case, it sets up a situation where Madonna’s voice would seem incongruous and undermine her feminine appearance.⁴⁶ However, Collins does also seem to be responding to concerns about manualism and oralism, because while *Hide and Seek* acknowledges that being deaf does not have to lead to one’s being mute, it depicts Madonna’s very strong resistance to using oral speech when this form of communication has become alien to her. Madonna resists all attempts to make her vocalise, and instead communicates via a combination of “signs” and written inscriptions.

While John Kitto seems to have internalized some of the criticisms that were made about deaf forms of communication, Collins is positive in his representation of the methods of communication used by Madonna. For example, Collins inserts the detail that Madonna becomes *proud* of the slate on which people write messages to her. It is suggested that she regards the slate almost as a fashion accessory, making it seem less offensive by decorating it (99, 121). The two friendly Miss Joyces write on Madonna’s

⁴⁶ Later, Collins did create a heroine who contradicted typical notions of female beauty: Marian Halcombe, whose body manifests an ideal womanly shape but whose face is said to be ugly and incongruous when considered in relation to her body (see *The Woman in White*). It is Marian’s facial appearance and her actions that are masculine, not her voice, but Collins was clearly concerned, from an early period in his career, with scrutinizing Victorian concepts of female beauty and appropriate behaviour. Martha Stoddard Holmes has suggested that Madonna’s unusual speech tones might sound sexually suggestive, like those of “an unsavoury adult man” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 80).

slate “with immense enthusiasm”, and Madonna happily writes back (77). Despite the fact that the slate slows down communication (121),⁴⁷ it is represented as being untroublesome. Because Madonna is so adept at communicating in various ways, Mrs Joyce temporarily forgets that Madonna is deaf, and actually tells her daughters to speak to Madonna orally (77).

Madonna is also depicted as favouring her own personal system of “signs” or gestures, which are known only to those in her circle. This system of personalized signs is described in some detail. For example, when Zack visits Valentine, Valentine waves his arms around his head continuously, which Madonna understands to be the signifier for “Zack” (124). The novel’s narrative values the fact that Madonna creates her own sign system, pointing out that this is convenient to Madonna and that personal signing can include inside jokes. There also seems to be an implication that by constructing her own sign system, Madonna can escape systems designed by others. The only drawback of her personal sign system is that it is *only* understandable to her circle of friends. However, even this disadvantage is greatly diminished, partly because Madonna seems happy to socialise within this small circle, but also because those who join her circle show a great readiness to use sign and gesture.

Madonna is also shown to be aware of the “finger alphabet”, a simplified version of sign language. Since Kitto provides detailed diagrams of “finger spelling” in *The Lost Senses* (see Kitto, 103-06) it is probable that the incidences of finger spelling in *Hide and Seek* refer to the same alphabet. Madonna is described as using this “official” finger alphabet with dexterity and rapidity (156). In contrast, her love interest Zack lacks the application to learn the official deaf and dumb finger alphabet properly; he is able to sign rapidly (129), but continually makes mistakes (153-54). Zack’s struggle to learn to finger-spell may indicate Collins’s taking notice of Kitto’s associations between sign and the feminine, but it also seems to disrupt Kitto’s devaluation of finger spelling by suggesting that it requires an effort to learn. In the context of the novel’s love plot, however, Zack’s inability to communicate fluently and equitably with Madonna indicates that he is unsuited to her. He is unable to understand her signs (including her “body language”) and too immature to make enough effort to say anything of much use to her.

Therefore, while Collins gains much of his initial information about signing, the finger alphabet and writing from Kitto’s work, the way he utilizes or interprets such

⁴⁷ Collins repeats Kitto’s assertion that “signs” and writing are comparatively “clumsy” and “slow” forms of communication, yet suggests that Madonna prefers these methods because they are familiar to her from her childhood (*Hide and Seek*, 121).

information often involves a departure from conclusions reached by Kitto. Collins's depiction of Madonna's deaf-mutism therefore does not rely solely on the experiences mentioned in *The Lost Senses*, as Collins appears to have his own viewpoint about whether Madonna should be expected to "fix" her disability.

While *Hide and Seek* depicts Mrs Peckover as feeling extreme guilt over her failure to force Madonna to speak again, the novel does not present this as a real catastrophe. In fact, Mrs Peckover does register that Madonna would have to be coerced into speaking, and that such coercion involves "tormenting her" (99). Since Madonna becomes so adamant that she will not speak, Mrs Peckover's decision to desist with such pressure is presented as showing respect for Madonna's feelings on the matter. Therefore, although *Hide and Seek* raises the question of whether it is a good idea to approach the disabled with tough love in order to help them retain or regain one of their senses, it seems to finally side with the view that a deaf-mute person has the right to decide for themselves how they want to communicate and whether they wish to speak.

It is possible that Collins realised that if he showed Madonna re-learning how to speak, he might diminish any sense of pathos surrounding her. This is in fact how Elisabeth Gitter seems to read *Hide and Seek*, as she suggests that the novel is conservative in its decision to present Madonna as happily choosing to be mute, and that Madonna is "beatified by speechlessness" (Gitter, 189).⁴⁸ However, I believe this idea to be misleading, because the general impression created of Madonna is not that she is 'pathetic' or 'saintly'. Instead, *Hide and Seek* starts a trend in Collins's writing that becomes increasingly apparent in his later depictions of disability, where he tends to reject the notion of eliminating disabilities via surgeries and new treatments. While almost every previous Victorian story about deaf-mute women had been presented in the mode of the "inspirational" story, in which a woman "overcame" her disability (Gitter, 179), one of Collins's primary agendas lay in suggesting that disabilities need not diminish someone's happiness - a message inherently at odds with supporting the desirability of 'overcoming' a disability.

⁴⁸ Gitter underestimates the extent to which Collins's narrative relies on *The Lost Senses*, and instead locates the main influence on Collins's book in the story of Laura Bridgman, a real life deaf-mute woman [who was also mentioned in Kitto's book] (Gitter, 188-89). Gitter appears to view Madonna as the kind of "inspirational" deaf-mute heroine that dominates the literature and drama of the 1820s-1860s. However, I believe much of Collins's purpose with *Hide and Seek* was actually to disrupt such melodramatic and "inspirational" representations of deaf-mutism, since he stresses his wish to do something different by creating a representation of a deaf-mute girl drawn "simply and exactly after nature" (Collins, "Note to Chapter VII", 431).

The development of compensatory senses and of dispositions.

While Collins does not present deafness and mutism as dreadful afflictions, he does nevertheless show interest in and discuss how Madonna's deafness influences the way she uses her remaining senses, and on the way it influences her character by encouraging her to develop a particular disposition or adopt particular behaviours.

The major developments *Hide and Seek* mentions in this regard include how Madonna develops a great reliance on using her vision to take in information, and the suggestion that temperamentally, Madonna becomes more self-reliant and self-contained:

As the course of her education proceeded, many striking peculiarities became developed in Madonna's disposition, which appeared to be all more or less produced by the necessary influence of her affliction on the formation of her character. The social isolation to which that affliction condemned her, the solitude of thought and feeling into which that affliction forced her, tended from an early period to make her mind remarkably self-reliant ... Her affliction had tended, indeed, to sharpen her faculties of observation and her powers of analysis to such a remarkable degree, that she often guessed the general tenor of a conversation quite correctly, merely by watching the minute varieties of expression and gesture in the persons speaking – fixing her attention ... on the changeful and rapid motions of their lips (119-20).

The first detail, that Madonna develops an ability to read the faces and lips of other people, focuses on the compensatory abilities that it was thought disabled people were able to develop. Madonna's attempt to read faces not only reflects that she attempts to read people's emotions and match them with those actions or words that she can comprehend, but also responds to the Victorian view that physiognomy often betrays character. Collins is also accurate in his suggestion that although Madonna tries to read other people's lips, she is not able to comprehend every word others say, but only often able to guess the tenor of other people's remarks. If we check this detail against the real-life experiences of deaf people with lip-reading, it appears that this representation is quite accurate; many sources about deafness, and deaf people themselves state that regardless of how much a deaf person practices lip-reading, only about thirty-percent of all English words can be lip-read with accuracy.⁴⁹ Again, Collins probably obtained this idea from Kitto, since Kitto mentions lip-reading in *The Lost Senses* (30-31).

⁴⁹ Websites that mention the limitations of lip-reading include
<<http://www.hearinglosshelp.com/articles/speechreading.htm>> and
<<http://deafness.about.com/cs/communication/a/lipreading.htm>>

The passage quoted from above also introduces the topic of how Madonna's "disposition" is influenced by her disabilities. *Hide and Seek* does not suggest that being deaf is a terrible personal state to be in, but it does suggest that Madonna feels some loneliness and that her deafness prompts her to become more self-contained and serious.

However, perhaps the strongest example of how Madonna's life changes due to her disability appears in the novel's discussion of the way that, after Madonna loses her hearing, she begins to find greater enjoyment in her remaining senses, primarily in her vision. She begins to take great delight in things that look beautiful, largely because "the seeing sense that was left her" is all that she can use to gain a sense of "happiness" (93). Her increased interest in the visual therefore develops as a form of aesthetic compensation, as well as becoming the primary way by which she takes in information. This interest in the visual is probably partly assuaged by Madonna's location in an artists' studio. However, one passage in the novel details Madonna's ability to enjoy watching the movements of the leaves on a tree for hours at a time. She is described as being put into an "artless rapture" by various experiences of "Nature", especially by watching the movements of trees, which cause her to tremble with "sensations of deep and perfect happiness". Collins is interested in how this sensory process is intensified for Madonna, and *Hide and Seek* suggests that the degree of "ecstasy" Madonna attains from such experiences is probably inconceivable "to her speaking and hearing fellow creatures" (94).

In such ways, *Hide and Seek* emphasises that Madonna's experience of disability is not only made up of practical difficulties encountered when negotiating the physical and social world, but that it also consists of some psychological effects prompted by her deafness and mutism; he suggests that the ways Madonna experiences the world are sometimes quite different from those that the able-bodied experience. The focus that he provides on her inner life also contradicts what had been a widely held belief that the deaf could not have rich inner lives and could only develop limited intelligence.

It is perhaps in its depiction of Madonna's inner emotional life and in its analysis of the effect that Madonna's disability has on her thought processes and on her psychological resilience that Collins's novel is most radical. Although we are given many visual clues as to Madonna's feelings - such as her blushing or her tears, which operate as further 'signs' in the novel - the narrator also reports some of Madonna's thoughts, not merely as paraphrased summaries, but as if he is directly quoting her. When Madonna excitedly signs to Lavinia, the narrator 'quotes' what Madonna signs

(156); the narrator also describes messages that Madonna writes on her slate. This displays recognition that Madonna is actually ‘speaking’, and by according her appropriate attention, validates Madonna’s methods of communication.

Previous literary representations of disabled characters had not focused on the characters’ interior psychology to such a degree, and had often not made their behaviour seem especially realistic or sufficiently motivated. For example, some of Dickens’s disabled characters from this period remain fairly undeveloped, or grotesques rather than rounded characters. Some of his disabled or disfigured characters from this time are dominated by behavioural ‘tics’ (such an approach occurs even with Silas Wegg, as late as 1864), or appear as comic figures (Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield*, 1849-50), as sinister people (Rosa Dartle in *David Copperfield*), or as villains (Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 1840-1). While Dickens did create sympathetic representations of disability, these were dominated by pathos and melodrama, such as in his depictions of Smike and Tiny Tim. Despite the brilliance of Dickens’s work, he was still tending to depict disabled characters from the *outside*; he was not regarding the psychological effects of their disabilities and not portraying them in the kind of three-dimensional, “naturalistic” way that Collins attempted in *Hide and Seek*.

Meanwhile, while other Victorian novelists did include disabled characters within their fiction, they tended to be peripheral, or also showed signs of the influence of melodrama, with disabled characters frequently being portrayed as “cripples” or as achieving little effect other than generating pathos. In the 1850s, apart from Collins, it does not appear that any novelist placed a disabled character at the very centre of their fiction or tried to explore the psychology that could be prompted by a sensory disability. Therefore, Madonna is very unusual: the entire plot of *Hide and Seek* revolves around explorations of her psychology and somatic processes, and the search for her true identity. She is given agency in the novel, she is involved in the lives of other characters, she has a tangible personality, and she is even given a love story.

Desirable and desiring.

Collins’s portrayal of Madonna is also radical in the degree to which it sexualizes Madonna, despite her being disabled. *Hide and Seek*’s focus on Madonna’s physical beauty makes sense when Madonna is a young child, as the image or idea of a little deaf and dumb girl may have some aesthetic or pathetic appeal. However, Collins continues to focus strongly on Madonna’s beauty when she is an adult, and to suggest her sexuality

as well. Disability scholars have pointed out it is not totally unusual or uncommon for disabled women to be depicted as beautiful (these scholars, however, refer to representations that are more recent than Collins's work. See Cahill and Norden, "Hollywood's Portrayals of Disabled Women"). However, Collins does subvert what had been previous literary tradition by suggesting that not only is Madonna physically desirable, but that she *desires* her love interest, Zachary Thorpe (Zack). This is especially unusual because *even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries*, disabled women are often assumed to be asexual, and are (either for that reason, or for reasons more directly linked to their disabilities) often overlooked when it comes to romance and marriage.

While it is never *graphic* in its depictions of Madonna's sexuality, nor is *Hide and Seek* euphemistic. The narrator states that Zack would probably attract the eye of *any* woman (he is fit, tall, and well built) (126-27), but it is significant that Madonna is one such woman who is attracted. However, Madonna's mutism means that she can only attempt to communicate her romantic feelings to Zack by giving him pictures she has made, or through her involuntary physical signals such as blushing and deep breathing. But, just as Zack mixes up communication when he tries to use the finger alphabet, he is unable to understand Madonna's romantic "signs" or "language". Thus her desire goes unread (or unheard) by him (126).

Moral implications of disability.

Throughout my discussion so far, I have focused on the elements of Wilkie Collins's writing about deafness and mutism that are unusual or innovative. *Hide and Seek* does put forward a message that Collins believed ran counter to the general opinion held by the Victorian public: that a person could still be happy when they lived with a disability. However, the radical aspects of Collins's message are tempered a little by his decision to also put forward the more conservative notion that disabled people can be valued for their ability to teach the able-bodied to be patient and grateful for their blessings, or to act with "kindness and gentleness". These claims are made by Collins in the "Note to Chapter VII"⁵⁰ that accompanied the 1861 edition of the novel. In this Note, Collins remarks upon the way that many disabled people bear "their heavier bodily afflictions of humanity" with "patience and cheerfulness", and states that emphasising this point is "the moral purpose to be answered by the introduction" of Madonna (431). Collins

⁵⁰ This authorial commentary did not appear until the one-volume edition of the novel, in 1861. There was no such explanation in *Hide and Seek*'s First (three-volume) Edition from 1854.

further emphasises this idea by adding a *second* disabled character, Lavinia Blyth, who suffers from a spinal condition, yet is well-adjusted, loving, and accomplished. While Lavinia Blyth has suffered from her spinal malady⁵¹ for many years, she never utters a word of complaint. She remains cheerful and surprisingly active (she manages most of the household and business affairs of her husband Valentine). She inspires loving and responsible behaviour from Valentine. Valentine, aware that he needs to be especially considerate of his wife and that he has extra reason to ensure his family's financial stability, works more diligently than he would naturally be inclined to. Lavinia's disability inspires Valentine toward being a better person. While Lavinia's inclusion and her upbeat and pragmatic response to having a disability may be regarded as 'positive' in some ways, the suggestions that disabilities help to encourage better behaviour from the able-bodied, or that those with disabilities may have superior morality to the able-bodied are less radical ideas than most of the other ideas *Hide and Seek* puts forward about disability, as are the comments suggesting that Madonna and Lavinia never express or wallow in "gloomy thoughts" (119).

Madonna is also represented as almost always being happy after her adoption by the Blyths. This suggests that her unhappiness as a child was largely due the exploitative and dangerous nature of her situation in the circus, or that the initial sadness and shock she felt as a child after the loss of her hearing gradually faded with age. As a young woman, Madonna is presented as being cheerful and social, and because Madonna looks beautiful, succeeds at lip-reading, and is good at observing other people's emotions, at times her disability almost becomes invisible. It is probable that Madonna's persistent cheerfulness and great beauty are attempts to endear her as much as possible to the reader; however, Collins also includes these details in order to stress Madonna's high degree of adjustment and to encourage reader identification with her.

Lest the emphasis on Madonna's persistent happiness run the risk of making her appear too angelic or saintly, Collins does not infuse her story with religious meaning, a move which runs against previous traditions of representing deaf-mute women (see Gitter, 179, 186). Although Madonna is presumably a Christian, *Hide and Seek* never shows her turning to religious beliefs for consolation or fortitude, and apart from the possible connotations of her birth name "Mary" and her nickname "Madonna", there is

⁵¹ *Hide and Seek's* depiction of Lavinia Blyth's spinal disease has been called "more clinically detailed than most Victorian representations of illness and disability". Stoddard Holmes, "Collins, Wilkie: *Hide and Seek*", *Literature, Arts, and Medicine Database* (online).

no other religious meaning attached to Madonna in the text, nor, indeed, to Lavinia.⁵²

Madonna does not display any obvious interest in religion, and appears to be satisfied by the support and consolation derived from her family and friends.

Because Collins represents Madonna and the experience and social effects of disability by utilising more than one approach, it may seem that *Hide and Seek* delivers some mixed messages about disability. For example, Madonna does, in quite a traditional way, seem to be used as a “narrative prosthesis” in the sense that the way other characters respond to her does function as a litmus test for their emotional or moral maturity. Valentine Blyth’s goodness is signalled by his immediately rescuing her, while Zack’s immaturity is indicated by his inability to take sufficient notice of Madonna or to comprehend that she loves him. Meanwhile, all of the morally ‘bad’ or brutish characters mistreat Madonna.

Collins does therefore mix radical and traditional ways of understanding and figuring disability, in order to aid the “moral” work of his novel. However, even if Madonna’s happiness is meant to provide a moral lesson,⁵³ her representation is both positive and innovative in other regards, especially in terms of the success with which she fits into the social world, and in terms of how the novel awards her agency by representing her interior thoughts and physiological processes.

Modern critical responses to *Hide and Seek*.

Hide and Seek has not received very much critical attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, probably because it has long been deemed an example of Wilkie Collins’s “lesser” fiction.⁵⁴ On the few occasions that *Hide and Seek* has been discussed,

⁵² In fact, *Hide and Seek* is particularly anti-religious in tone. The first section of the novel is dominated by a satire of Mr Thorpe’s over-religiosity. *Hide and Seek* does contain one passage where Valentine imagines that Madonna might be able to commune with the “angels” (113), but the novel never dwells on any implications of this idea.

⁵³ While other characters’ responses to Madonna are presented as indicating their moral worth, Madonna does not seem to *directly* inspire improvements in the behaviour of other characters: Valentine rescues Madonna because he is already ‘good’. While I believe Collins’s sincerely meant his note about the morally improving effect of the disabled characters in this novel, it should be noted that his “Prefaces” and “Notes” to his readers were generally written *after* the first editions or the serial appearances of his novels and often tend to be defensive diatribes in which Collins tries to protect his novels from criticism. It may be that with this note to *Hide and Seek* Collins was already defending himself against the idea that his novels had no moral purpose, or explaining why he had focused on a deaf-mute character.

⁵⁴ Even if modern critics suggest that *Hide and Seek* is not as accomplished as Collins’s best work, they are in error if they state that *Hide and Seek* was not at all critically or commercially successful.

Collins acknowledged that sales were not as brisk as he would like; he attributed this to his novel appearing at the same time as the Crimean War began (Collins, “Preface to the Revised Edition”, *Hide and Seek*, xv). The Crimean War actually began ten weeks before the publication of *Hide and Seek* (Page, *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, 8). Statistics and reports about the relative ‘success’ of *Hide and*

these critics have usually questioned why Collins does not “allow” Madonna to marry Zack at the end of the novel. I believe that this question is a misguided one; however, it does suggest the degree to which Collins is successful with giving Madonna potential as a romantic heroine. The other issue which modern critics have most often focused on is the relevance or meaning of Madonna’s illegitimacy. It has also been noted that *Hide and Seek* raises the issue of employment rights for the disabled, and the adoption of disabled children.

Recently, it seems that the major critical concern has been the “lack” of marriage at the end of *Hide and Seek*, with the suggestion being raised that the plot complication introduced by Collins – revealing that Zack is in fact related to Madonna – is brought in deliberately in order to evade the issue of whether a disabled woman could marry, or in order to depict problems brought about by Madonna’s illegitimacy. These critics suggest that Collins is prepared to represent a disabled woman as being attractive, but is not prepared to go one step further.⁵⁵ However, I believe such complaints merely reveal the degree to which we have come to expect or desire the ‘happy’ ending that is typical of so many Victorian novels.

The critics who see a “failed” love plot in the ending of *Hide and Seek* overlook the fact that *Hide and Seek* is not structured as a love story, but rather as a *mystery*. The arc of the novel is always toward solving the mystery of Madonna’s lineage and providing Madonna with a family rather than with a husband. From the moment Mathew Marksman first appears, it becomes clear that the two strands of the novel (Madonna’s story and Mathew’s story) are bound to intertwine. For Madonna, a happy ending will consist of her being provided with a family. This is not an unimportant or second-class reward, as the Victorians believed that knowledge of one’s ancestry was important for one’s self-knowledge and social position. At the beginning of the novel Madonna is an orphan, but by the novel’s end has gained an uncle, has learnt the identity of her mother,

Seek appear contradictory. Lillian Nayder states that *Hide and Seek* “met with modest [commercial] success” (Nayder, *Unequal Partners*, 32). However, the “Victorian Web” website lists *Hide and Seek* as one of the ‘best-sellers’ of 1854, suggesting that the number of volumes sold was still high in comparison to sales of other novels (see Allingham, “Significant and Best-Selling Victorian Novels, 1837-1861”).

Hide and Seek received a number of favourable contemporaneous critical responses. These included a positive review in the *Athenaeum* (by Geraldine Jewsbury; qtd. in Page, 56). *Hide and Seek* was highly regarded by Dickens, who called it clever and “in some respects masterly” (Dickens, letter to Georgina Hogarth, 22 July 1854; qtd in Page, 61). Page remarks that Collins “had no grounds for complaint regarding the reception accorded to it by the reviewers” (Page, 8).

⁵⁵ See Jessica Cox, “Representations of Illegitimacy”, 159-60 and Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 75, 83.

and has learnt that that mother loved her.⁵⁶ Although *Hide and Seek* holds back its final revelation that Zack is Madonna's half-brother, it telegraphs from very early on that they may somehow be connected. Additionally, because Zack is shown as barely being responsive to Madonna, readers of *Hide and Seek* are never given a solid reason to expect a romantic outcome.

Neither does *Hide and Seek* ever state that Madonna is unlikely to marry, or suggest that she is unattractive because of her disability. In fact, it does the opposite: Zack reveals that he thinks Madonna very pretty (121), and he states that several visitors to Valentine Blyth's art studio are in love with her (206). When Zack notices Mat staring at Madonna he immediately assumes that Mat has fallen in love with her (204); Mat, in turn, assumes that Madonna is married to Valentine (205). While Zack never returns Madonna's romantic interest, the novel suggests that this is due to Zack's cluelessness and immaturity; the novel does not ever suggest that his disinterest arises from her disability, or that Madonna's illegitimacy may prevent her from marrying.⁵⁷

Although Madonna is not romantically united with Zack at the end of *Hide and Seek*, Wilkie Collins does reject the assumptions that a disabled woman could not be physically attractive, could not herself have any sexual feelings, or should not marry. The idea that at this early point of his career Collins was not prepared to represent a disabled woman as successfully marrying or as succeeding in love does not really stand up, either, when one realises that Lavinia Blyth, another disabled character in the novel, is married. It may also be relevant to note that later in his career, with *Poor Miss Finch* Collins *was* to create a heroine with a sensory disability who does marry happily.

The disappointment felt by some modern literary critics in the novel's ending suggests that we have come to assume that the primary base of Victorian novels is the marriage plot. But Collins aims for something different and challenging with *Hide and Seek*:

⁵⁶ In some other examples of Victorian fiction, the gaining of such knowledge constitutes either all or part of the hero or heroine's reward. In *Bleak House* Esther Summerson comes to know the identity of her mother and father. Charlotte Brontë's work features similar storylines for some of her heroines: in *Jane Eyre*, Jane finds her cousins, while in *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone discovers the identity of her mother. *Hide and Seek* has a similarity to *Bleak House* (1852-3), due to the fact that like Esther, Madonna is illegitimate, while Esther has a (temporary) facial disfigurement.

⁵⁷ Catherine Peters remarks that although Zack is 21 years old, he seems less developed emotionally than a 14-year old and does not seem to have developed any interest in women (Peters, "Introduction", *Hide and Seek*, xvi). I agree that this is the case. As such, it does not make sense to expect Madonna to be paired with Zack.

placing a naturalistic representation of deaf-mutism within a domestic novel that is also structured as a mystery.⁵⁸

Another aspect of *Hide and Seek* that has been commented on in recent criticism is the novel's treatment of Madonna's illegitimacy. It has been posited either that her disability may be some physical reflection or repercussion of her illegitimacy, or that her illegitimacy is present in the novel as another "symbolic", form of disability. Jessica Cox suggests that Collins's failure to marry Madonna to Zack may be intended as a representation of the repercussions of illegitimacy. Cox also posits that Madonna's disability might be intended as a symbolic punishment for the sins of her mother. Since Madonna's mother is a fallen woman, Cox points out that when Madonna falls from the circus horse, is injured and then loses her hearing, this may replicate her mother's sexual "fall".⁵⁹

I disagree with such a reading, however, since such an argument suggests that Madonna's disabilities mark her as visibly tainted by her mother's sin. It implies that the sins of the mother are visited on the child, and that Madonna cannot marry because of the disabilities she acquired. Such a reading requires that we view Madonna's disability as a punishment for her mother's fall from grace (Cox, "Representations of Illegitimacy in Wilkie Collins's Early Novels", 156).⁶⁰ If such a conservative and moralistic message

⁵⁸ Some of Collins's Victorian readers may have *appreciated* Collins's decision not to end the novel with a marriage. An anonymous reviewer for *Bentley's Miscellany* wrote: "we are really grateful to Mr. Collins for sparing us the usual wind-up of a happy marriage. This he renders impossible, as the hero and heroine are discovered at last to be brother and sister, and no other parties are introduced with whom they can be respectively joined in the bands of holy wedlock" (Unsigned review, "Short Notes on Recent Novels", *Bentley's Miscellany*, July 1854, xxxvi, 97-8; qtd. in Page, 59).

Catherine Peters has forwarded the idea that Collins was "deliberately inverting" the Dickensian pattern of a 'brother and sister' relationship which becomes a romantic one (such as David Copperfield and Agnes Wickfield, or Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit) (Peters, "Introduction", *Hide and Seek*, xiii-iv).

⁵⁹ Presumably, Madonna's mother was 'injured' when she lost her chastity, and then was no longer 'intact'.

⁶⁰ Cox suggests that in *Bleak House* Esther Summerson's smallpox scars are a "social impairment" and indicate her mother's lack of chastity (Cox, "Representations", 152). This example is then used to suggest that Madonna's disabilities exist as "a punishment for her birth" (Cox, *ibid.*, 156-7). However, Collins's aims are frequently very different from those of Dickens.

Also, despite reading Collins's depiction of Madonna as "positive", Cox claims that "a number of Collins's novels include distinctly negative depictions of disability" (Cox, *ibid.*, 157; see note 35). However, she cites only two examples of 'negative' depictions, one of whom is Miserrimus Dexter of *The Law and the Lady*, whose representation, I will argue, is often very sympathetic. The other character mentioned, 'The Lodger', appears only in a novella. It seems that because of these two 'negative' representations, she concludes that "it seems unlikely that Collins's primary purpose in ... *Hide and Seek* was to promote the rights of the disabled" (Cox, "Representations", 157). However, *Hide and Seek* does strongly promote Madonna's right to free will, and Collins mentions wanting to spread a more accurate view of deaf-mutism.

Cox also suggests that the able-bodied characters in *Hide and Seek* exclude Madonna from conversations and hide information from her (Cox, *ibid.*, 157). However, Lavinia goes out of her way to repeat many conversations to Madonna, even those containing trivial comments, and the hearing characters in the novel all learn or attempt to learn the finger alphabet and signs.

lurks covertly under the surface of *Hide and Seek*, this would certainly complicate possible interpretations of the novel, and perhaps some of Collins's Victorian readers read the novel in this way.

To Jessica Cox's credit, however, she recognizes the uncertainty of such a harsh reading, noting that it would seem to contradict Collins's usually liberal attitude toward illegitimacy and his progressive responses to disability (Cox, *ibid.*, 156). Clues from the text itself also make it very unlikely that Collins intends his novel to carry this moralistic reading. When Mrs Peckover receives a letter that calls the baby Madonna "the product of sin" and suggests that she is marked by this sin, Mrs Peckover *and her clergyman friend* condemn the letter as "shocking and unchristian" (87-88). These characters see Madonna as being completely innocent of any wrongdoing, not having absorbed the guilt of her mother.

This is not to say that *Hide and Seek* does not recognize any correlation between the physical disability of deaf-mutism and the 'social disability' created by illegitimacy. Collins's novels acknowledge a symbolic relation between these issues, and Collins was to explore this relation more fully in *No Name* and *The Dead Secret*. However, in *Hide and Seek* the adult Madonna is never represented as encountering any great social problems as a consequence of her illegitimacy. Once she is adopted by Valentine, she is accepted by most people.

Like Jessica Cox, Martha Stoddard Holmes acknowledges the "suspicious reading" that "might propose that incest is brought in as an emergency measure" to allow Collins to avoid resolving "the more complicated issue of disability, sexuality, and marriage" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 83).⁶¹ But, ultimately Stoddard Holmes does not endorse this "suspicious" perspective on *Hide and Seek*; instead, she notes that because Collins does not provide his disabled heroine with any "nondisabled sisters or friends" who could contrast with her and thus suggest her "unfitness – or fitness- for marriage", the novel never promotes the idea that Madonna could be thought unsuitable for marriage (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 75).

⁶¹ Stoddard Holmes does make one possible link between the "incest" threat in *Hide and Seek* and the novel's mention of disability: one fear present in the nineteenth century was that incestuous couplings might produce disabled offspring: "By shifting the focus to incest, Collins still evokes a concept with associative links to deafness" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 83). However, it might seem contradictory if Collins intended to play upon his readers' fears of a scientific link between incest and disability, since his commentary suggests that he wrote *Hide and Seek* with the aim of lessening the stigma attached to disability. By the time he wrote *Poor Miss Finch* (1871-2) he was not very concerned with the idea that disabilities could be inherited.

Two further issues raised in *Hide and Seek* have proved to be of some interest to those critics who have examined the novel through the lens of disability studies. Disability studies, and Victorian studies in general, have frequently shown an interest in how, historically, some people with disabilities have been referred to by the public as “freaks”, and in the fact that Victorian “freak shows” featured a disproportionate number of people who were “freakish” in no way beyond simply having a disability.

Modern commentators on the Victorian freak show have expressed divided opinions on this phenomenon. The majority appear to conclude that these shows were exploitative and that disabled people may only have appeared in them because they were unable to find other employment - no matter what skills they might have – or because their families had failed to accept or support them. Some scholars have suggested that it is likely that disabled people appearing in freak shows were often underpaid, or perhaps not paid at all (see Durbach’s summary of such analyses, 13-14). Other academics have thought differently, questioning the degree to which performers in freak shows were trapped in such employment (see Smit, “A Collaborative Aesthetic”, 286, 296-300; see also Durbach, 9, 11-13) and pointing out more positive attributes of circuses and freak shows: they provided “non-normative” people with a chance of employment and sometimes presented them as “fellow citizens” “worthy of respect” (McHold, “Even as You and I”, 32). However, in recent years, the prevailing view seems to be that such employment was usually demeaning and encouraged harmful stereotypes of the disabled by inviting the audience to objectify or ridicule the disabled person; to sensationalize difference rather than encourage identification.

Although *Hide and Seek* does not feature a freak show, it brings up issues related to the showing of disabled persons as a spectacle, via its representation of Madonna’s exploitation in Jubber’s circus. Although perhaps not intended by Collins, for a modern audience, Madonna’s exploitation by Jubber evokes the issue of employment rights for the disabled. Madonna is press-ganged into Jubber’s circus as a very small child, and while at the circus, Madonna has no employment rights. Even more concerning, Madonna is subjected to physical threats and punishment while she works for the circus (*Hide and Seek*, 106). Even if Madonna were able to express her reluctance to Jubber and resist her exploitation, Jubber would pay her no heed. Moreover, Madonna’s guardians, Mr and Mrs Peckover, are surprisingly unable to protect Madonna from Jubber’s abuse, because Mrs Peckover’s protectiveness is compromised by her wish to keep her own job (91, 106-07).

The circus scenes in *Hide and Seek* can therefore be read as an early instance in English literature of the depiction of the professional marginalization of the disabled, and of their susceptibility to forms of abuse. Madonna's chances of protesting her work conditions or escaping from her employment are very limited because of her age and sex, the casual nature of the employment, and a lack of workers' unions. While this situation is very much indicative of social problems in the Victorian period, it has similarities to the situation faced by disabled workers in western societies today, who still encounter prejudice when applying for jobs, or whose rights are often compromised even when they are employed. Such problems are usually caused by the ignorance of employers, but can also occur when disability rights are dismissed as a 'minority' issue.

Martha Stoddard Holmes has suggested that *Hide and Seek* might be of interest to a contemporary audience due to its depiction of the adoption of a disabled child. Stoddard Holmes draws attention to the lack of any official procedure surrounding Valentine's "adoption" of Madonna. It is unclear whether such informality was normal for "adoptions" during this time period, but Holmes suggests that because Madonna is disabled, she is especially available for the taking, and that for modern readers, *Hide and Seek* may highlight "the ethical issues surrounding quick adoptions of disabled and other children perceived as 'available' to anyone willing to take on their guardianship" (Stoddard Holmes, "Collins, Wilkie: *Hide and Seek*"). Stoddard Holmes also notes that following his adoption of Madonna, Valentine steadfastly tries to prevent Madonna's blood relatives from finding her; behaviour that could be read as problematic. In her book *Fictions of Affliction* Stoddard Holmes makes the further suggestion that Madonna's adoption by Valentine seems "imperative" not only because Madonna is physically abused, but because there may be a threat of sexual abuse (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 205, note 2).⁶²

While these commentaries by Cox and Stoddard Holmes do not focus directly on Collins's representation of Madonna's sensory disability and its physical or psychological effects, they do suggest ways in which *Hide and Seek* contains ideas that are still of relevance or interest today.

⁶² Personally, I do not perceive any implication that Jubber abuses Madonna sexually or might do so. Although he certainly abuses her physically, I think the threat of sexual abuse is less likely to have occurred to Victorian readers. However, I understand how this might occur to some modern-day readers.

Certainly, various disability scholars have drawn attention to the disproportionately high rates of sexual abuse directed toward children and adults who are disabled. Susan Wendell, for example, states that people with disabilities are likely to have suffered from high rates of "verbal, medical, and physical abuse ... sexual abuse and exploitation" (Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 31).

Conclusion.

Catherine Peters reads *Hide and Seek* as “an indignant attack on the deafness of early Victorian bourgeois society ... to the cries for help, understanding, and pity of those who are in one way or another on the margin of that society” (Peters, “Introduction”, *Hide and Seek*, viii-ix). For Peters, Collins’s interest in disabled people was part of his wider concerns about a variety of marginalized social groups. I would agree that this is a useful way to first approach *Hide and Seek*. The novel marks the beginning of Collins’s provocative representations of disabled characters and is the first of his commentaries on the mechanics and effects of the social stigmatization or marginalization of the disabled.

However, apart from its attempt to counteract the marginalization of the disabled, *Hide and Seek* is also concerned with representing sensory disability in a scientifically and psychologically accurate way; this is one of the strengths of the novel. Moreover, that Madonna remains deaf and chooses not to speak throughout *Hide and Seek* seems indicative of a decision on Collins’s part to eschew the traditional narrative form in which a disabled person ‘triumphs’ over their disability. Collins refuses to present the idea that Madonna would have a much better life hearing and speaking. Instead, *Hide and Seek* suggests that Madonna’s movement toward maturity involves her accepting - even embracing - her disability. When the novel describes Madonna’s use of the finger alphabet and her own system of signs, it is never depicted as being difficult for her to adopt this behaviour; instead, it is presented as being natural to her. If there is any sense of Madonna ‘overcoming’ disability, it is only in the sense of Madonna’s allowing it to bother her as little as possible. Even this early in his career, Collins refuses to accept that disabilities must be considered ‘afflictions’ or that being disabled must ruin one’s life.

Therefore, I think it is a misreading to regard Madonna’s refusal to speak again only as displaying passivity, or as merely being symbolic of the way that as a woman, or as a disabled person, Madonna is silenced in Victorian society. It is true that in many regards Collins was a proto-feminist, yet I do not think that a symbolic statement about women’s ‘silencing’ in Victorian society is all that Collins aims for with *Hide and Seek*, since he displays great interest in the material and psychological factors of Madonna’s disability. Collins’s own authorial comments indicate that his purpose with *Hide and Seek* was to show that a disabled person can be well-adjusted, happy, and a good example for others. Since the novel’s message is that Madonna can be happy despite her disability, Madonna has no need to go through the distress that could attend trying to counteract her disability by learning oral speech. It appears that Collins chooses not to deliver Madonna from her

‘affliction’ precisely because his novel suggests her degree of affliction is not great. The comments Collins makes in his “Note to Chapter VII” (431) and the fact that he was probably responding to growing controversies over deaf education provide us with a rationale for why Madonna never undergoes any extensive speech training, and remains mute.

Therefore, rather than reading Madonna’s decision not to speak as a sign that this novel is conservative or that it supports the idea that women are preferable when silent, I suggest that we may read Collins’s decision not to deliver Madonna from her deafness or her mutism as part of *Hide and Seek*’s message that Madonna, well-adjusted to her disability, is socially acceptable as she is. We can also regard Madonna’s refusal to speak in the light of the beginning of the struggles for pre-eminence between manual (sign) culture and oralist culture, and in many ways her decision to remain mute and continue using sign prefigures the value that many deaf people today place on identifying with Deaf⁶³ culture rather than with hearing culture.

Hide and Seek’s recognition of Madonna’s right to decide which communicative methods she prefers and whether she engages in rehabilitation prefigures modern Deaf culture’s campaign for the recognition that the deaf have their own valuable culture and complex methods of communication. The fact that Madonna is not forced into learning skills that would make her function more ‘normally’ suggests that *Hide and Seek* does not represent disability as something that needs to be fixed and controlled.⁶⁴ *Hide and Seek* seems even more progressive when the able-bodied characters adapt *their* methods of communication by learning how to use Madonna’s sign system.

Hide and Seek also provides the first and perhaps the most interesting example of how Collins conducted scientific research in preparation for his writing and incorporated such knowledge into his fiction.⁶⁵ Part of the artistic success of *Hide and Seek* is due to

⁶³ This term refers to those who have hearing impairments but celebrate “Deaf culture” and forms of sign language (who often refer to themselves as “Deaf”) rather than those (“deaf”) who see deafness primarily as a disability that would benefit from treatment, speech training, or prosthetic aids.

⁶⁴ This is an extremely important concept in modern-day disability theory and in the lives of many people with disabilities or serious medical conditions. For example, on the website run by a group called “Red Disability”, one may read: “Red Disability is not fundamentally opposed to people having medical treatment to ‘cure’ disabilities. But we believe that it should be the true choice of the individual, and no pressure [whether medical or social] should be exerted on people to undertake ‘treatment’” (see <<http://www.red-disability.org/index-text-only/changes.htm>>).

⁶⁵ Catherine Peters has suggested that Collins “was profoundly affected” by *The Lost Senses*, and that Kitto’s book “was to influence not only *Hide and Seek* but the whole course of his later fiction” (Peters, “Introduction”, *Hide and Seek*, xviii; see also p. xix). This may suggest too much, as it would attribute virtually *all* of Collins’s subsequent interest in disability to his having read *The Lost Senses*. We should bear in mind that Collins claimed to have been interested in representing a deaf-mute character prior to even knowing of Kitto’s book.

Collins's decision to closely follow *The Lost Senses*'s descriptions of the deaf experience. However, *Hide and Seek* is also of interest because it is one of the first English novels to feature a disabled woman who exudes an obvious sexuality⁶⁶ or to raise the possibility of marriage for a disabled woman.

Hide and Seek does not pretend that Madonna is the same as any able-bodied person. It does suggest that she has developed a particular "disposition" due to the presence of her disabilities. This observation, however, is part of the novel's aim for accuracy in its representation of how sensory disabilities may affect people. By the end of *Hide and Seek*, Madonna is no longer a suffering 'poor little girl', but a mature person who has agency: the novel gives her a 'voice' via the insights it provides into her psychology and its descriptions of her signing and writing.

Therefore, although beginning from within the parameters of sentimentality, *Hide and Seek* delivers a portrayal of Madonna that is highly positive and which follows Collins's purpose of humanizing deaf and deaf-mute people and showing that someone who is disabled can be well-adjusted even when dealing with 'afflictions' ("Note to Chapter VII", 431).

Hide and Seek marks the beginning of Collins's frequent assertion that being disabled need not lead to personal unhappiness, and is the first instance of his taking part in debates relating to attempts to rehabilitate the disabled or responding to the idea of 'fixing' disabilities via surgeries or any other means that seem arduous to the disabled individual or that set up artificial situations that may impinge on their self-autonomy. His decision to communicate such a message, making use of a memoir of real-life experiences of deaf-mutism, resulted in the creation of the very first English novel or drama that was at all 'true-to-life', scientifically informed, and sympathetic in its depiction of a deaf-mute character, and in terms of its representation of the lived experience of sensory disability.

It appears that Collins hoped to teach the able-bodied to view the disabled as being acceptable, and as people they could identify with, or (more conservatively) admire for their patience. *Hide and Seek*, although not always regarded as one of Collins's 'sensation' novels, engages very heavily with topics related to the senses, and it provides a great example of how sensation fiction sometimes used 'affect' for political and social means – such as trying to alter the way that the public regarded disability (see Tromp,

⁶⁶ Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) contains a blind female character, Nydia, who is in love with the novel's hero. However, Nydia is basically a villainess (see Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 40-43).

Gilbert, and Haynie, “Introduction”, *Beyond Sensation*, xxi). *Hide and Seek* should not be read as an example of a “failed love plot” or regarded as one of Collins’s lesser novels; rather, it should be celebrated for its revolutionary representation of the lived experience of sensory disability.

THE DEAD SECRET (1857):

The movement from 'other' to 'mother': Blindness, Mental Illness, and Illegitimacy

The Dead Secret is another early Collins novel, predating his most famous novel *The Woman in White*.⁶⁷ After his success with depicting deaf-mutism in *Hide and Seek*, in *The Dead Secret* Wilkie Collins turns his attention to portraying a blind character. Leonard Frankland, like Madonna Blyth, is not born physically disabled but has acquired a disability, having become blind shortly before the time period covered by the novel. Despite this surface similarity to the concerns of *Hide and Seek*, Leonard's disability is used to quite a different effect than that achieved by Madonna's representation in *Hide and Seek*, operating on more of a symbolic level, and Leonard is not the main character in this novel. While Leonard is the only physically disabled character in *The Dead Secret*, the novel also directs a great deal of interest to another character, Sarah Leeson, who represents Collins's first attempt at portraying a character who is subject to mental instability. The representation of Sarah Leeson is one of Collins's most effective portrayals of mental disturbance, focusing most strongly on the effects of trauma in Sarah's past. In fact, the portrayal of Sarah may well be the first instance in English literature of a detailed representation of a character who suffers from post-traumatic stress symptoms. What is also of interest is the complex way in which Collins intertwines the two stories of Sarah and Leonard (and his wife, Rosamond) by creating thematic links between Leonard's blindness and the need for Leonard and Rosamond to overlook Sarah's lower class status, her position as fallen woman, and to help her recover from her traumatized mental state. On a slightly more comic level, the examination of the practical and symbolic meanings of physical and mental disabilities is counterpoised, more humorously, by the comic relief supplied by the novel's hypochondriacal character, Mr Phippen, who suffers from health problems both real and imagined, and his portrayal of Rosamond's father, Doctor Chennery, who is obsessed with physical strength. Collins uses his portrayals of Mr Phippen and Doctor Chennery to continue his satire of society's obsession with physical health (by means of this satire he buttresses his general argument that happiness is not dependent on having a perfect body), and to continue his criticism of the medical profession.

⁶⁷ In his "Introduction" to *The Dead Secret*, Ira B. Nadel explains that Collins had joined the staff of Dickens's periodical *Household Words* in 1852, and that while Collins's early style was heavily influenced by Dickens, by 1857 Collins had begun to acquire a strong literary reputation on his own merit.

Unlike Collins's representation of Madonna's deafness in *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret* does not focus very strongly on depicting Leonard's responses to his disability or on psychological effects prompted by the disability. Instead, Leonard's blindness seems to serve the primary purpose of aiding various plot developments, and has a secondary, symbolic purpose of suggesting a notable flaw in his character. It may be that without a memoir of disability which he could use as a template for his novel (as he had for *Hide and Seek*, with *The Lost Senses*), Collins reverted to the more traditional approach of utilising the possible symbolic meanings of a disability. Leonard's disability, therefore, rather than being explored in so much psychological detail as Madonna's was in *Hide and Seek*, is used more as a means of 'narrative prosthesis'. The development of the action in the novel is aided by Leonard's blindness. His blindness means that his sighted wife Rosamond is left free to investigate a secret that is hidden somewhere in their house, Porthgenna Tower, without encountering interference from Leonard. In fact, because of his blindness, Leonard is rather dependent on his wife, relying on her to relate various pieces of information to him. While the romantic juxtaposition of a weak male character with a stronger female character is a feature common to many of Collins's plots, Leonard's 'weakness' is clearly exacerbated by his disability.

Leonard's blindness also has a symbolic function, and works on two registers. First, his blindness functions as a representation of his classism – the snobbery he displays in his feelings about and interactions with people of lower social position – he is blind to the potential value of people from lower classes. His blindness also therefore functions as a register of his lack of insight about the value of cross-class interaction, or perhaps a lack of 'foresight' regarding society's progression toward greater democracy or egalitarianism. Leonard, a member of the gentry, maintains very conservative views about social classes and his disability is clearly intended by Collins, fairly radical and progressive in his social views, to suggest that 'classism' is a form of blindness.

Another symbolic meaning of Leonard's blindness relates to his lack of knowledge about Rosamond's real antecedents. Rosamond, having thought that she was born into a high class, discovers that she is in fact the daughter of the lower class Sarah Leeson. Moreover, not only is Rosamond the daughter of a servant, but her mother Sarah is also stigmatized by mental disturbances. Consequently, a large portion of *The Dead Secret*'s suspense hinges upon whether Rosamond will be forthcoming with Leonard about the knowledge she discovers about her ancestry, or whether she will keep him 'in the dark'. The two disabled characters, Leonard Frankland and Sarah Leeson, are in fact closely

linked thematically throughout the novel, since Leonard's negative attitudes toward the lower classes threaten to ruin his marriage with Rosamond.

This chapter therefore focuses primarily on examining *The Dead Secret's* embodiments of physical and mental disability in the figures of Leonard Frankland and Sarah Leeson. Before discussing the novel further, I must point out that there is a real shortage of literary criticism about *The Dead Secret*, and that any criticism that *has* been produced about *The Dead Secret* has barely focused on the novel's depictions of disability, whether Sarah Leeson's mental health or Leonard Frankland's blindness. Previous criticism of this novel has instead almost always focused on its 'illegitimacy' plot. Such criticism has therefore been of limited use for my study of disability, although I shall discuss some of the points raised by previous critics when it helps to explain how Rosamond's illegitimacy relates to the meaning of 'disability' in *The Dead Secret*.

Leonard Frankland and blindness.

Leonard Frankland does not dominate the plot of *The Dead Secret*, yet is the novel's romantic hero. Leonard is described as having lost his sight due to a combination of his inherent physical weakness, which has been worsened by the mental and physical wear of carrying out delicate, visually demanding work: the making and repairing of watches and clocks. Leonard's neighbour, the vicar Doctor Chennery, explains to mutual friends that when Leonard's symptoms of visual disturbance first appeared, he advised Leonard's parents to force Leonard to rest his eyes and to engage him in physical, outdoor pursuits, rather than watch-making. However, Leonard persisted with his watch-making. This work, in conjunction with his recurring illnesses, finally brought on complete blindness (48).

Luckily for Leonard, it proves that blindness is not an impediment to his marrying, as he marries the novel's heroine, Rosamond. It is in this plotline that we first witness Collins fully dealing with the question that some critics have raised about Madonna's failure to marry at the end of *Hide and Seek*. With his characterization of Leonard, Collins makes it very clear that he is not against disabled people marrying. *The Dead Secret* certainly does raise the question of whether such a marriage is appropriate, since once Leonard's disability began to manifest, he offered to release Rosamond from the engagement; Doctor Chennery seems to agree that Rosamond would have been justified had she not gone through with the wedding (49-50). However, this idea is quickly

dismissed, since for Rosamond, Leonard's blindness is a non-issue when it comes to her feelings for him.

Despite Rosamond's acceptance of Leonard, he is regarded by friends and nearby villagers with a mixture of pity and curiosity. Doctor Chennery, who performs the marriage ceremony, refers to Leonard as "Poor blind young Frankland" (45), and the wedding is arranged to take place secretly so that Leonard can escape curious onlookers or those who would be shocked by the idea of a sighted woman marrying a blind man. Doctor Chennery explains:

"Young Frankland has not got so used to his affliction yet, poor fellow, as to bear being publicly pitied and stared at in the character of a blind bridegroom. He had such a nervous horror of being an object of curiosity on his wedding-day ... that we settled to have the wedding at an hour in the morning when no idlers were likely to be lounging about" (*The Dead Secret*, 45).⁶⁸

Rosamond insists on marrying Leonard, despite his blindness. While Leonard only becomes blind *after* Rosamond has already become strongly attached to him, Rosamond's devotion nevertheless suggests that she thinks Leonard's disability is irrelevant to his suitability for marriage. She loves him, so she marries him. However, Leonard's blindness does function as a test of Rosamond's feelings. The novel's very first mention of Leonard emphasises his helplessness and his dependence on Rosamond:

Instead of holding the gate open for the lady to pass through, he hung back, allowed her to open it for herself, waited till she had got to the churchyard side, and then, stretching out his hand over the gate, allowed her to lead him through the entrance, as if he had suddenly changed from a grown man to a helpless little child (*The Dead Secret*, 39).

The very few scholars who have analyzed *The Dead Secret* have repeatedly concluded that Leonard Frankland's blindness features in the novel merely as a simple plot device. They note that Leonard's disability serves the useful function of allowing Rosamond to move about the family home, Porthgenna Tower, investigating a hidden secret. While Leonard is aware that Rosamond is hunting for something, his blindness leaves him unaware of the seriousness of her search, and therefore prevents him from intervening. Furthermore, when Rosamond *does* discover the secret – one which is dangerous to herself – she is in a position to keep the secret from Leonard, because of his blindness.

⁶⁸ This quote is interesting for its mention of Leonard's fear of being made a focus of attention and pity. Before the reader even 'meets' Leonard, they have been given a clue that he is self-conscious and worries about how other people will respond to his disability.

Kate Flint articulates the standard academic reading of Leonard Frankland's blindness in her article "Disability and Difference", stating that

An additional blind man, Leonard Franklin, in *The Dead Secret*, seems less of interest in his own right than as an enabling device: as Lillian Nayder comments in her book on Collins: 'In effect, Collins uses Leonard's invalid condition to invert the traditional relation between husband and wife. His blindness makes possible Rosamond's gender transgressions, by placing the husband in a subordinate and wifely position of dependence' (Flint, "Disability and Difference", 157-58).⁶⁹

Both Kate Flint and Jessica Cox stress that Leonard's blindness "renders him dependent on his wife, thus reversing traditional Victorian marriage roles" (Cox, "Representations of Illegitimacy", 163). Rosamond is placed in a position of power, while Leonard's position replicates the feminine position within marriage (Flint, 158).⁷⁰

I believe that these observations are insightful, and it *is* highly apparent that Leonard's blindness is a useful plot device, as Rosamond is able to disobey Leonard, carry out secretive investigations, and then withhold information from Leonard, because of his disability. Rosamond can be an extremely active heroine, without being stopped by Leonard. But I do not agree that Leonard's disability functions only as a plot device. What is perhaps more surprising – and significant – is the degree to which Rosamond makes decisions for Leonard, including deciding what he 'sees' and what he knows – perhaps an ironic commentary on how much control husbands could technically assert over their wives. It might be, therefore, that Collins also makes use of Leonard's disability to create a commentary about gender roles within marriage.

It has also been suggested that Collins's depiction of Leonard lacks any great psychological depth, and that it is far inferior to his later portrayal of a blind character in the novel *Poor Miss Finch*. In an "Introduction" to *Poor Miss Finch*, Catherine Peters asserts that while Collins "had created a blind character before, in the early novel *The Dead Secret*", he did so "without exploring the psychology of blindness" (Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, xi). While it is certainly apparent that the examination of blindness in *The Dead Secret* is less psychologically nuanced and less accurate in its medical detail than Collins's representation of the same disability in *Poor Miss Finch*, *The Dead Secret* explores Leonard's psychology with more detail than it has been given

⁶⁹ Flint refers to Nayder's *Wilkie Collins* (New York: Twayne, 1997), 57.

⁷⁰ This inversion hints toward why Collins has usually been regarded by critics as a subversive writer. Moreover, the parallel noted by both Cox and Flint is often remarked on in disability theory: the disabled male is often seen as being placed in a subject position similar to that of a female, or males with disabilities are often considered by others as "feminized" by their disability.

credit for. Throughout this chapter, therefore, I would like to offer a *new* reading of the significance of Leonard Frankland's disability, showing how Collins not only uses blindness as symbolic metaphor, but that he does also explore Leonard's psychology; Leonard's blindness functions as far more than merely an "enabling" device for the novel's plot.

One major use that Collins makes of Leonard's disability is to aid in the novel's battle between conservative reliance on 'classist' beliefs and the development of a more unconventional view of class structure and interaction. In fact, the first use that Collins makes of Leonard's disability is to introduce the idea that the novel's heroine is an unconventional, determined, and passionate woman. When Leonard became blind, and "offered to release Rosamond from her engagement" (50), Rosamond's affections remained unaltered (50). Doctor Chennery's description of these events emphasises both Rosamond's steadfastness and her lack of sentimentality (49). Via such description the reader gains the sense that Rosamond is unlikely to be majorly upset by disability or to focus her attention on *pitying* the disabled, but rather that she simply has a deep love for Leonard (49); her desire is to keep him from ever being unhappy (50).

Rosamond's readiness to marry a disabled man is an early indicator that she will prove to be an unusual heroine. The image of Rosamond as an unusual young woman is further enhanced as other characters talk about her: for example, Master Robert tells Mr. Phippen that Rosamond is able to "catch a ball ... with one hand, and go down a slide with her legs together" (47). The hypochondriac Mr. Phippen responds to such alarming descriptions of Rosamond by exclaiming "Bless me! ... What an extraordinary wife for a blind man!" (47). However, in the context of Wilkie Collins's novels, this pairing is not so unexpected. A man who is unusual is coupled with a woman who is "energetic", "extraordinary" and unsentimental.

The novel suggests that what is more likely to prove detrimental to the couple's happiness is not Leonard's disability, but the fact that the two lovers possess opposing political beliefs and behavioural tendencies in relation to their interaction with people of other classes. While Leonard holds to a belief in social tradition and hierarchy, believing in the "distinctions in rank on which the whole well-being of society depends" (73), Rosamond favours socially democratic ideas, strong enough to be potentially revolutionary.⁷¹

⁷¹ Jenny Bourne Taylor notes that in literature, the 'bastard' often functions as a radical force, especially in Renaissance drama where "the bastard is a profoundly disruptive force who can serve both radical and

Some critics have pointed out that initially, Leonard appears to be Rosamond's moral guide (see Cox, "Representations", 163, and Nadel, "Introduction" to *The Dead Secret*, xxii). However, as the novel progresses, Leonard conveys his attraction to an elitist ideal that *The Dead Secret* palpably does not want to support: Leonard's physical blindness is therefore revealed to be a signifier of his moral blindness as well (Cox, *ibid.*, 163). Leonard criticises Rosamond for being friendly with servants, whom she should consider to be 'beneath' her, and he places undue importance on his family origins and on Rosamond's supposed descent from an old and aristocratic family. During the novel, Leonard receives a major shock, as he is told that the woman he loves is the daughter of a *servant* – for Leonard, the ultimate "other" – and worse again, that Rosamond was fathered illegitimately.

The consequences of Leonard's *figurative* blindness are demonstrated in one particular scene when he attempts to "read" the appearance of a statue by using only his fingers. Leonard and Rosamond finally find the location of the Myrtle Room, the room which will they both know contains the secret that Mrs. Jazeph has been anxious to keep. Rosamond describes the room's appearance for Leonard so that he will have some idea of what it looks like and what it contains. However, having accidentally touched a piece of sculpture in bas-relief, Leonard immediately stops, and impatiently tells Rosamond: "Let me try, for once, if I can't make a discovery for myself ... Let me try if my fingers won't tell me what this sculpture is meant to represent" (271). It seems that at this point, Leonard has grown slightly tired of relying on Rosamond for information and for any sense of 'sight', and that he wishes to demonstrate the accuracy of his remaining senses. However, Leonard is almost completely wrong in his reading of what the bas-relief represents, believing it to show a man sitting down, whereas in reality, it is "a miniature copy of the famous ancient statue of Niobe and her child" (271).

Rosamond immediately places her own interpretation on the significance of Leonard's failure to correctly 'read' the statue, claiming that Leonard's misinterpretation means that his touch cannot be relied upon to send correct information: "you can't trust your touch, love, as you can trust me!" However, the incident is also significant due to other aspects of the novel that it highlights. Niobe was a classical character who, in the arts and literature, had become a stock figure for the representation of mourning. Niobe, having been overly proud of her children, was punished for her hubristic boasting, as

conservative functions" (see Taylor, "Nobody's Secret", 575). Rosamond seems designed to serve such a function, and in *The Dead Secret* Collins is particularly influenced by the drama of the Renaissance.

Artemis and Apollo slew all or most of her children. Following her bereavement, Niobe wept constantly and turned into stone.⁷² She was therefore associated both with motherly love and with a mother mourning for lost children. It is not difficult to realise that the reader should immediately associate the sculpture of Niobe with Sarah Leeson and her sorrow at being separated from Rosamond. Leonard's inability to read the subject of the sculpture correctly points to his continued ignorance about Rosamond's class origins, and to the moral limitations still present in his character: at this juncture in the novel, Leonard would still be unlikely to sympathise with the sufferings of an unwed mother who lost her child, and would still be likely to reject Rosamond as his wife if he knew that she was the daughter of a servant. Leonard's assumption that the bas-relief shows a *man* sitting down may also indicate that his world-view is male-centered: his thought is masculinist in the sense that he holds to values such as the importance of aristocratic privilege, lineage and legitimate inheritance. The sculpture actually depicts a *woman*, but Leonard is unable to 'see' or intuit this, or to notice her suffering. The scene also suggests that Leonard may, by necessity, have to continue relying on Rosamond for interpretation of his world, whether he desires this or not – he really is at the mercy of her decisions about whether to interact with him honestly or dishonestly.

On another level, in this scene Collins depicts the unreliability of the senses when they are isolated from other senses: Leonard's touch is of limited value when disassociated from the knowledge provided by visual images. Collins was later to create a similar incident in his later novel about blindness, *Poor Miss Finch*, when Lucilla Finch's apparent ability to recognise colours through her touch is found to be unreliable. Although Collins aims to argue against the idea that the disabled cannot be happy, he does seem to suggest the superiority of the information gained when the senses act together, while also questioning the idea that the disabled always develop reliable compensatory powers. Therefore, in this scene Collins is both questioning any claim Leonard may make to have reliable or extra-sensitive touch, while also hinting that Leonard still lacks various forms of insight into the world around him and the worth of others.

Therefore, Leonard's blindness does not merely serve the practical function of allowing Rosamond to exert autonomy and to take actions that bring about further plot developments. Leonard's blindness also carries a symbolic relevance, and in order to be

⁷² She appears in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in Book XXIV of Homer's *The Illiad*.

truly worthy of Rosamond, Leonard must be figuratively cured of the classism signified by his blindness.⁷³ Rosamond supplies Leonard with the insight that he has been lacking.

Therefore, in *The Dead Secret* Collins reverses the traditional tendency to suggest that the blind may possess greater spiritual or moral insight than able-bodied people. Literature and myth abounds with stories and images of blind figures who are prophets or moral guides. Despite their disabilities, these figures are “seers” who prophesy what shall occur and provide insight as to the wisest choices others could make.⁷⁴ However, Collins makes it apparent that Rosamond is socially and morally much wiser than her husband. By so doing, Collins disrupts one of the most entrenched societal attitudes surrounding blindness, which was to ‘mythologize’ blindness by suggesting that the blind possessed greater wisdom and spirituality, or greater moral insight, than the average person. Such an attitude seems to have developed in order to suggest that blindness was attended by consolations and compensations, or that there was a greater spiritual meaning behind such an ‘affliction’. However, rather than present Leonard as possessed of any extraordinary powers, Collins presents him as a person of ordinary intelligence who is flawed like anyone else. Leonard’s blindness is symbolic, but nevertheless, he is presented as an ordinary man. Therefore, while *The Dead Secret* does use Leonard’s blindness as a plot device, his blindness is also made use of for its symbolic power; it is used, in a way that subverts previous myths about the blind, to draw attention to his ‘moral’ blindness, and to Rosamond’s contrasting wisdom about class interaction.⁷⁵

Somewhat paradoxically, it had also been traditional for writers to use various forms of disability to signify a moral lack within a character or within their society. Collins does this with Leonard’s blindness, but the use made of his blindness is more radical than usual, as it is used to criticise the idea of social rankings and to promote

⁷³ Jessica Cox notes a similarity between the plot of *The Dead Secret* and the love plot of *Jane Eyre*: the sighted young woman becomes a moral advisor to the blind man. However, unlike in *Jane Eyre*, Collins does not construct an ending in which the blind man recovers his physical sight (Cox, “Representations of Illegitimacy”, 163). Building on Cox’s observation, I would like to point out that it is possible that Leonard’s blinding functions as a levelling mechanism that might be seen as lessening the class difference between him and the illegitimate Rosamond, or that, as in *Jane Eyre*, Leonard’s blindness may function as a symbolic ‘castration’ that allows the relationship to have a more equal balance of power.

⁷⁴ Teiresias is one such example from literature, and John Milton was often cited as a real-life example of a blind ‘prophet’. *The Dead Secret* refers to Milton when Miss Sturch mentions him as someone who “poetically describes his blindness” (49).

⁷⁵ Leonard’s blindness can also be symbolically linked to illegitimacy, as having been born illegitimate may place a social stigma or form of social ‘disability’ on a person. This issue will be dealt with in more detail later in the chapter.

egalitarianism. The narrative makes it plain that readers should interpret Rosamond's opinions as being more insightful than Leonard's. It is difficult for the reader to resist such an interpretation or to side with Leonard's opinion, as the novel asks the reader to accept Sarah Leeson, a servant, as Rosamond's true mother, and to view her reunion with Rosamond as a happy ending.

As Collins shows Rosamond's dominant personality overshadowing that of her husband, he begins a tendency of pairing strong-willed and capable female characters with male partners who are almost always morally weaker than the female, and morally or physically flawed. However, by stressing Rosamond's steadfastness, her ability to keep her word, and her love for Leonard, Collins also creates thematic and temperamental links between Rosamond and her hidden mother, Sarah Leeson. Rosamond's stubbornness in the face of Leonard's disability and her determination to marry him mirrors Sarah's determination to keep her word to Mrs Treverton (even if Sarah's tenacity is more obsessive and unhealthy). Rosamond's love for Leonard parallels the devotion that it is suggested that Sarah felt for her lover, Hugh Polwheal (Sarah is permanently traumatized by Hugh's unexpected death). Both women love unconventionally, and both must deal with a 'catastrophe' that befalls their lover.

Scientific realism and criticism of the medical profession.

We have seen in *Hide and Seek* how Wilkie Collins was concerned to create a depiction of deaf-mutism that was founded in scientific and psychological fact. Although scientifically describing Leonard's blindness is not a major feature of *The Dead Secret*, Collins *does* once more include details of how a disability develops and how the disability affects Leonard psychologically. Previous critics seem to have overlooked *The Dead Secret*'s attempt to deliver a scientifically accurate description of how Leonard's blindness develops. The novel describes which symptoms first alerted Leonard to the coming change in his eyesight. Doctor Chennery mentions the chronology of all of Leonard's symptoms of approaching blindness: a mixture of ill health and fatigue, followed by seeing black spots and having bad headaches. Chennery also suggests some possible *causes* of Leonard's blindness (such as his interest in watch-making), although none of these is confirmed as the certain cause.

However, Collins infuses satire into the discussions of Leonard's blindness by making Doctor Chennery's beliefs about the causes of the blindness seem slightly ridiculous, and critics of *The Dead Secret* have missed a significant aspect of this novel by not noticing

Collins's satirization of the Victorian pre-occupation with health and exercise. Doctor Chennery, a sports and recreation addict, believes that Leonard became blind because he was physically inclined toward weakness, and that he exacerbated this bodily weakness by never taking part in physical exercise. According to Doctor Chennery, had Leonard been physically stronger in general, or had he swapped indoor pursuits for outdoor ones, he might have been able to fight the encroaching blindness.

While it seems ludicrous for Doctor Chennery to believe that any disease or organic deterioration of the eye could be totally prevented by physical exercise, on the other hand it seems reasonable to suggest that the onset of Leonard's blindness might have been stalled temporarily had Leonard given up watch-making, since such work requires the eye to focus intensely. It also seems reasonable to assert that physical exercise may have helped Leonard's general constitution, even if, ultimately, it could not have prevented blindness from occurring.

The obsessive Victorian quest for health and the masculine preoccupation with sports was a major concern of Collins; it was a preoccupation he was later to critique more fully in *Man and Wife*, in which he questions the assumption that a healthy physique always indicates a strong constitution or a healthy mind. With Chennery's remarks, Collins is, early in his career, already beginning to question such correlations.

It is difficult to assess to what degree the reader should agree or disagree with Doctor Chennery's assessment of Leonard, as Chennery appears to be extreme in his support of sports and exercise. His character is also offset by the hypochondriac, Mr. Phippen. While Chennery is a strapping fellow of 6 feet and 2 inches, bursting with health, Phippen is always complaining of ill health. Phippen's hypochondria appears ridiculous, but perhaps the reader should read Chennery as being similarly excessive. It was an extremely popular Victorian belief that a sound body could create or help to maintain a sound mind, but such beliefs seem to be exaggerated in Chennery's characterization.⁷⁶

The uncertainty over how to view Chennery's commentaries about Leonard's eyesight is complicated further as Chennery criticises the treatments offered by the eye specialists who are called in to aid Leonard. Chennery scoffs at the eye doctors who "blistered him behind the ears" and "drenched the lad with mercury", and gave widely differing opinions, and it is true that these eye doctors are ultimately bewildered and unable to save Leonard's sight. Yet the alternative treatment suggested by Chennery – that Leonard should ride on a pony and drink a great deal of wine – would also likely be

⁷⁶ As Chennery is a vicar, he may be intended as a caricature of 'the Muscular Christian'.

totally ineffective (48). Therefore, while *The Dead Secret* contains “a criticism of medical practice” (Nadel, “Introduction”, xxi),⁷⁷ it also seems to simultaneously lampoon Doctor Chennery’s critical response toward these same doctors. It is therefore left highly ambiguous what should have been done to help Leonard. Collins appears to both criticise the medical profession and make fun of useless folk remedies (at least, the belief that exercise can prevent any illness).

Meanwhile, when hearing the story of how Leonard’s blindness developed, Mr Phippen seems to respond as though blindness could be a contagious condition:

“Spots did he see before his eyes? I see spots, black spots, dancing black spots, dancing black bilious spots. Upon my word of honour, Chennery, this comes home to me – my sympathies are painfully acute – I feel this blind story in every nerve in my body” (*The Dead Secret*, 48-49).

Phippen surely cannot think that he can ‘catch’ blindness, but his over-concern about health is perhaps intended to parody Victorians’ obsessive interest in health and illness, or to suggest the ambiguous nature of somatic symptoms. His comments may also contain a meta-textual joke about the effect Collins’s novel may have on the reader. Perhaps what makes most sense when trying to interpret such passages is to agree with Ira B. Nadel’s remark that such commentaries reveal Collins’s recognition of “the suppositional nature of medical knowledge” (Nadel, “Introduction”, xxi).⁷⁸

The psychological effects of blindness.

While previous critics have stated that Wilkie Collins does not bother to make any psychological investigation into the effects of blindness in *The Dead Secret*, this is in fact not the case. Collins does not go into this topic in formidable depth, but there are passages in *The Dead Secret* where an interest in the psychology of blindness is revealed. For example, Collins provides one small but important insight into Leonard’s psychological state when Leonard discusses the life he lives in his dreams. When the newly married couple discuss Leonard’s blindness, Rosamond expresses that she does

⁷⁷ Nadel notes the apparent lack of diagnostic aptitude of another doctor in the novel: one doctor who observes Sarah Leeson cannot decipher what may have happened to her, beyond generalized suppositions (Nadel, “Introduction”, xxi).

⁷⁸ Nadel reminds us that in an earlier collection of short tales, *After Dark* (1856), Collins had constructed a “narrative frame” in which “a partially blind, travelling portrait painter ... to save his sight, must give up painting for six months” (Nadel, “Introduction”, *The Dead Secret*, ix). This suggests not only that Leonard’s characterization may have been a development or repetition of this earlier brief appearance of blindness in Collins’s fiction, but that Collins’s interest in blindness had been present for at least a year before he wrote *The Dead Secret*.

feel some pity and sorrow for Leonard. Leonard tries to comfort her by telling her that whenever he dreams, he is no longer blind:

“I was going to say, Rosamond, that I have observed one curious thing about myself since I lost my sight. I dream a great deal, but I never dream of myself as a blind man. I often visit in my dreams places that I saw and people whom I knew when I had my sight, and though I feel as much myself, at those visionary times, as I am now when I am wide awake, I never by any chance feel blind. I wander about all sorts of old walks in my sleep, and never grope my way. I talk to all sorts of old friends in my sleep, and see the expression in their faces which, waking, I shall never see again” (66-7).

Though Leonard registers one of the least positive aspects of his blindness – waking up each morning only to realise he is blind (67), there are nevertheless some consolations available to him. He has retained the power of his memory and his mind’s eye (in a quite powerful degree). While he can no longer see Rosamond as she currently is, he can still see her in his mind’s eye, and it allows him to remember her with the appearances which cause him to think of her most affectionately. In his dream,

“You were a little girl, and the glen was in its old neglected state, and yet, though I was all in the past so far, I was in the present as regarded myself. Throughout the whole dream I was uneasily conscious of being a grown man--of being, in short, exactly what I am now, excepting always that I was not blind” (67).

Lest he seem stuck in the past, Leonard has also remembered Rosamond’s grown-up face very vividly, for it was the last thing that he ever saw:

“My last look at your face has painted your portrait in my memory in colours that can never change. I have many pictures in my mind, but your picture is the clearest and brightest of all” (68).

Rosamond admits that there is some consolation in this thought, even for her, since

“it is the picture of me at my best ... When years have passed over us both, Lenny, and when time begins to set his mark on me, you will not say to yourself, 'My Rosamond is beginning to fade' ... The bright young picture in your mind will still be my picture when my cheeks are wrinkled and my hair is grey” (68).

While these passages convey the pathos of Leonard’s disability and the bitter-sweetness of how it has affected his relationship with Rosamond, they also successfully convey the very close bond between Leonard and Rosamond and reveal some aspects of Leonard’s

psychological state. It appears that Leonard is still coming to terms with his blindness: he wishes he could still see, and is vividly remembering the past – but he also seems to generally accept his disability and his new dependency on Rosamond.

One other very important issue raised within these passages is the necessity of mutual trust and trustworthiness between the couple. *The Dead Secret* suggests that the issue of ‘trust’ and of being honest is particularly important when one member of the couple is blind. When one member of the couple is dependent on the other, the more powerful actually needs to prove to be *dependable*. The more able or more capable member of the couple will ideally not abuse their power or hide their actions, decisions, or character from the other. Rosamond raises this issue herself: as Leonard is literally *blind* to anything she does, she must prove to be even more *transparent* in her actions than a spouse usually would be:

“My eyes serve for both of us now, don't they? You depend on me for all that your touch fails to tell you, and I must never be unworthy of my trust--must I?” (66).⁷⁹

In *The Dead Secret*, therefore, Collins investigates what issues lie at the heart of successful heterosexual relationships (or marriages), using Leonard’s disability in order to intensify and draw attention to the importance of *trust*.

The Dead Secret’s emphasis on the importance of Rosamond’s honesty and reliability actually ties in with what had been a primary observation about the blind in scientific commentary about blindness. Martha Stoddard Holmes states that in Victorian scientific writing, “Overpowering suspicion ... is said to characterize blind men’s feelings toward their sighted wives” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 28).⁸⁰ If this is the case, it appears that Collins’s characterization of Leonard may have been planned to counter the reputation of mistrustfulness and pathology attached to blind men. While Rosamond is shown to be ultimately trustworthy in any case, Leonard is *always* already shown to be *very* trusting of Rosamond (almost to the degree of naivety). If *The Dead Secret* was written with the covert moral intent of negating social impressions that the blind were always anxious and suspicious of others, this purpose would also seem to correspond with the novel’s *acknowledged* intent of promoting and praising marriages that are

⁷⁹ The importance of the need for honesty and trust between this particular couple is indicated by Leonard’s last name, “*Frankland*”, a name that suggests truthfulness and being forthright.

⁸⁰ The full quote, relevant to a number of Collins novels, is: “Overpowering suspicion, for example, is said to characterize blind men’s feelings toward their sighted wives, the mutual feelings of the blind and sighted, and deaf people’s feelings toward the world at large” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 29).

founded on and carried out according to the principles of “‘LOVE’ and ‘TRUTH’” (*The Dead Secret*, 362). The novel’s message seems to be that when a marriage is founded on reciprocal “love” and “truth”, any husband may feel safe placing trust in his wife.⁸¹

The relationship between Rosamond and Leonard constitutes a commentary upon the earlier relationship between Mrs. Treverton and her husband Captain Treverton. The problems that occur in *The Dead Secret* are precipitated by Mrs. Treverton’s failure to be truthful to her husband and to trust in his love for her: she deceives her husband, blinding him to the truth, and thus creating the novel’s ‘secret’.

Plot structure and the tension between blindness and revelation.

Lastly, analysis of the novel’s plot shows that the presence of Leonard’s blindness is closely related to how Collins’s novel is structured. After Collins published *The Dead Secret*, he was criticised by some reviewers for letting his readers know the secret about Rosamond’s birth far too early in the novel. Such reviewers decided that Collins’s decision led to a structural flaw in the novel and made the story less exciting than it could have been. However, Collins argues against this in the “Preface” that he wrote to accompany *The Dead Secret*’s 1861 edition. In this Preface, which contains metaphorical references to sight and knowledge, Collins notes that “I was blamed for allowing the “Secret” to glimmer on the reader at an early period of the story, instead of keeping it in total darkness till the end” (Collins, “Preface”, *The Dead Secret*, 5; emphasis added). Collins asserts that

If this was a mistake (which I venture to doubt), *I committed it with both eyes open*. After careful consideration, and after trying the experiment both ways, I thought it most desirable to let the effect of the story depend on expectation rather than surprise; believing that the reader would be all the more interested in *watching the progress* of “Rosamond” and her husband towards the discovery of the Secret (Collins, “Preface”, *The Dead Secret*, 5; emphasis added).

Leonard’s blindness was clearly intended to hold great metaphorical meaning, since four years after the novel’s first publication, Collins was still thinking of his novel in terms of its interactions between sight and blindness, even on a structural level. As the author

⁸¹ Jessica Cox shares a similar view of the novel’s message, stating the novel’s final message is that “love and truth” should be valued over class boundaries and inheritances. She also suggests that because the narrative values “truth” so heavily, “Sarah Leeson’s suffering can be read as punishment for the deception she practices, rather than for her sexual transgression” (Cox, “Representations of Illegitimacy”, 164-5).

who controls the narrative voice of his novel, Collins maintains a position very similar to the position of power that Rosamond holds over Leonard. He has the ability to reveal a great deal of information to the reader whenever he wishes to, or conversely, to hold back pieces of information.

With *The Dead Secret*, Collins was attempting to innovate, to explore a new possibility for structuring a mystery novel. However, it does not seem completely coincidental that his decision to ‘let the reader in on the secret’ parallels Rosamond’s decision to tell the truth to her blind husband about her origins, rather than keep him ‘in the dark’. While it is not *morally imperative* for Collins to let his readers know the ‘secret’ so quickly, he keeps his plot *transparent* rather than bombard his readers with a huge revelation during the novel’s last chapters. While this is risky, there is a great deal of ‘honesty’ in Collins’s narrative method, and in practical terms, it allows the reader the interest of *watching* Rosamond as she makes ethical choices based on her knowledge of the secret.

Sarah Leeson’s psychological trauma.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of *The Dead Secret* is the portrayal of the effects of trauma and emotional burdens on the mentally disturbed character Sarah Leeson. When Collins first introduces Sarah, he presents her as a ‘mystery’ in need of solving, and her characterization largely consists of exploring and explaining her mystery. Not only does Collins do this with depth and effectiveness, but his portrayal of Sarah may well be the first substantial representation in any novel in English of a character suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or a related anxiety disorder. Sarah’s characterization demonstrates Collins’s great strength in depicting minds that are undergoing psychological disturbance, while many issues of importance to Sarah’s characterization are also inextricable from the issues that have been mentioned in my discussion of Leonard.

Collins chose to foreground Sarah in his commentary upon this novel. In the short “Preface” to *The Dead Secret*, Collins suggests that with Sarah’s representation he intended to depict what might happen in the mind of a character who is already weak, timid and retiring (and who has suffered two bereavements), when they are placed under the added stress of single-handedly keeping a dangerous secret.⁸² Sarah’s decline,

⁸² Collins states that he considers Sarah the most “elaborately drawn personage in the story” and that her portrayal was prompted by “The idea of tracing, in this character, the influence of a heavy responsibility on a naturally timid woman, whose mind was neither strong enough to bear it, nor bold enough to drop it

therefore, according to Collins, portrays the psychological effects of loss, deception, guilt, and guilt-induced trauma. Therefore, while *The Dead Secret* functions on the surface as a mystery novel with Gothic influences and featuring the portrayal of a blind man, it is also a psychological novel.

Despite the fact that Sarah Leeson is a very intriguing character, there is currently almost a complete absence of literary scholarship surrounding her. To date, Ira B. Nadel is the only critic who has written at any length about Sarah's characterization and her purpose in the novel. But because Nadel's essay on *The Dead Secret* is introductory and ranges over a number of topics, he does not delve deeply into Sarah's characterization, and many of the comments he makes about Sarah are generalized. His examination of Sarah's psychology does not venture much deeper than his terming her "prematurely grey and mentally distracted" (Nadel, "Introduction", xiv).⁸³ Nadel does, however, note the growing importance of "psychological aberration" in Collins's novels from the late 1850s onwards (Nadel, "Introduction", ix), and he does make some interesting suggestions about Sarah, some of which I will build on during my own discussion of her.

Ira B. Nadel comments upon the Gothic settings for the novel, which include the landscape and the ruinous house, Porthgenna Tower. Nadel suggests that "The ruined state of the house *indicates its moral as well as physical decay*, while the intended repairs, the physical changes necessary for the building to survive, mirror the moral changes necessary to renew the life within its walls" (Nadel, "Introduction", xix). However, Nadel seems to miss (or leave unmentioned) the obvious correlation between Porthgenna Tower's ruinous state and the ruinous state of Sarah Leeson's body and mind. Both the house and the person have suffered from the same events that followed the death of Mrs Treverton.

altogether". While Collins acknowledges that Sarah was not particularly well-liked by reviewers, he still remarks that "I privately give "Sarah Leeson" the place of honour in the little portrait-gallery which my story contains" (Collins, "Preface", written at Harley Street in 1861; *The Dead Secret*, 5). His comments suggest that Sarah was the character he had taken the most pains to create; they also imply that she is his favourite character in *The Dead Secret*.

Revelations of Sarah's moral flaw of timidity, *within* the novel's text, include Sarah's complaint "I can't bear it alone; it's too much for me", and the narrator's comment that "All her looks, all her actions, betrayed the vain struggle of a weak mind to sustain itself under the weight of a heavy responsibility" (*The Dead Secret*, 25).

⁸³ Nadel states that Sarah "acts suspiciously and dangerously" when pretending to be Mrs Jazeph and nursing the ill Rosamond; he suggests that her presence in this scene will make the reader uneasy (Nadel, "Introduction", *The Dead Secret*, xv). He also believes that it is "inexplicable" that Sarah decides to hide the secret letter in the Myrtle Room rather than give it to Captain Treverton (Nadel, "Introduction", *The Dead Secret*, xiv). However, the narrative *does* give Sarah sufficient motivation for wishing to hide the letter, by stressing her timidity.

As soon as Sarah is mentioned in the first chapter of *The Dead Secret*, the narrator establishes her as a compelling character, mentioning that she somehow draws the eye of many men. Sarah is described as having looks that are deeply unsettling, yet somehow still remaining attractive. Right away, the narrator establishes that something catastrophic has happened to Sarah – something that made her old and worn out before her time:

I am the wreck of something that you might once have liked to see; a wreck that can never be repaired--that must drift on through life unnoticed, unguided, unpitied--drift till the fatal shore is touched, and the waves of Time have swallowed up these broken relics of me forever (*The Dead Secret*, 11).⁸⁴

Various areas of Sarah's body and soul are in need of repair and threaten to fall apart. Throughout *The Dead Secret* Sarah begins to undergo some of these "intended repairs", the "physical" and "moral changes" that would be necessary to "renew" life within her, but these changes are in themselves traumatizing. Sarah gains psychological support in her quest when she moves to live with her Uncle Joseph, but she benefits the most fully once she is reunited with her daughter Rosamond, because it was her removal from Rosamond that initially caused a great deal of her suffering. Her reunion with Rosamond is presented as helping to make her more whole again physically and psychologically.

Sarah is presented as being a good and honest person at heart, but despite this, it is implied that her physical state, like that of Porthgenna Tower, is partly caused by moral decay. The implied "moral decay" may refer to Sarah's having had pre-marital sex. Sarah is punished for this sin when her lover Hugh Polwheal dies. But Sarah's true moral sin - and the cause of many of her difficulties - seems to be her general "weakness of character", which causes her to have a predilection toward "timidity". Her timidity and her fear of doing wrong, in turn seem to feed her often overwhelming degree of anxiety. The narrator continually refers to Sarah's "weakness" and moral "timidity", and it is because of this timidity that Sarah is unable to resist being drawn into Mrs Treverton's plan to misrepresent Sarah's baby as her own. She becomes complicit in a lie which ensures that an illegitimate person becomes the heiress to Porthgenna Tower.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The boat metaphor used here does not seem to carry any special plot resonance, other than the word "wreck", unless the metaphor ties to the Gothic genre's reliance upon ruined buildings, or to the fact that part of the novel takes place near the Cornish coast. What may be more significant is what Sarah suggests about the loneliness of the mentally ill or psychologically troubled.

⁸⁵ Sarah is induced by Mrs Treverton to keep the secret that her daughter, Rosamond, is in fact Sarah's daughter. She is not only a false heir to Porthgenna Tower, but was born illegitimately.

By agreeing to this give Mrs Treverton her baby and to then keep this “secret”, Sarah commits a crime: by presenting Rosamond as Captain Treverton’s daughter, Sarah (though not benefiting personally) engages in fraud and theft. Therefore, Mrs Treverton insists that Sarah not sign the confessional paper merely as a “Witness”, but as an “Accomplice” (19). Sarah’s dishevelled physical state may therefore be read as indicative of her moral failings as well as her psychological struggles.

After Mrs Treverton dies, Sarah undergoes a huge internal battle over whether – and to what degree – she shall follow Mrs Treverton’s dictates. Her mental debate is accompanied by mental sophistry over what Mrs Treverton actually swore her to. Eventually, Sarah takes actions that result in the “secret” remaining hidden for another fifteen years after the time that she was supposed to help reveal it (28-38).⁸⁶

Sarah certainly seems to have a predisposition toward moral timidity and to be a very non-assertive person, very reliant on being led by those with authority. It also seems she may be slightly more susceptible to nervous shocks than most people would be. However, from Collins’s representation of her, it appears that her psychological difficulties do not stem from any disorder that pre-exists all of the difficult life events that she endures. Instead, Sarah’s extreme anxiety seems to be almost entirely prompted by her having experiencing traumatic events, and her experience of continuing to relive these events in her mind *as* trauma. Thus, to a modern reader, it appears very much that with his representation of Sarah, Collins is representing a character suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. This idea is in fact implied by the narrator, using terms suitable for the novel’s Victorian provenance. The very first secret set up by the novel, before any mention of the baby-swapping plot, is the ‘secret’ of what traumatic event happened to Sarah in the past (12).

When he introduces Sarah, Collins first establishes her presence in a household, then makes remarks about her physical appearance, and then presents her past and her appearance as a mystery for the reader to uncover.⁸⁷ In doing so, he also introduces a problem that he examined in many of his novels: the difficulty of interpreting the sanity or the psychological status of another person, or, alternatively, the difficulty of understanding the true nature of their suffering. The narrator states that various men are

⁸⁶ Rosamond is aged about six or seven when her ‘mother’ Mrs Treverton dies, and the year is 1829 (*The Dead Secret*, 37). Book II of the novel pushes the chronological time of the novel ahead by fifteen years (*The Dead Secret*, 38).

⁸⁷ Collins is actually presenting Sarah in a similar style to how he introduces his romantic heroines.

fascinated by Sarah's appearance but unable to guess at what events might have caused such suffering:

No two men interpreting that story for themselves, would probably have agreed on the nature of the suffering which this woman had undergone. It was hard to say, at the outset, whether the past pain that had set its ineffaceable mark on her had been pain of the body or pain of the mind. But whatever the nature of the affliction she had suffered, the traces it had left were deeply and strikingly visible in every part of her face (*The Dead Secret*, 11).⁸⁸

After focusing on the difficulties of 'interpretation', Collins continues with his description of Sarah, and it becomes highly apparent that he is describing someone who has gone through serious trauma and not been able to let go of their anxiety:

Her cheeks had lost their roundness and their natural colour; her lips, singularly flexible in movement and delicate in form, had faded to an unhealthy paleness; her eyes, large and black and overshadowed by unusually thick lashes, had contracted an anxious startled look, which never left them and which piteously expressed the painful acuteness of her sensibility, the inherent timidity of her disposition. So far, the marks which sorrow or sickness had set on her were the marks common to most victims of mental or physical suffering. The one extraordinary personal deterioration which she had undergone consisted in the unnatural change that had passed over the colour of her hair. It was as thick and soft, it grew as gracefully, as the hair of a young girl; but it was as gray as the hair of an old woman (*The Dead Secret*, 11).

Sarah's signs of ageing, especially her grey hair, are presented as being all the more shocking because they seem "to contradict, in the most startling manner, every personal assertion of youth that still existed in her face" (11). It is this incongruity between youth and ageing, beauty and suffering, that causes a sense of the uncanny: "Sickly and sorrow-stricken as she was, she looked, from the eyes downward, a woman who had barely reached thirty years of age" (11-12). Sarah therefore presents a riddle to her fellow servants: "What shock had stricken her hair ... with the hue of an unnatural old age? Was it a serious illness, or a dreadful grief that had turned her gray in the prime of her womanhood? That question had often been agitated among her fellow-servants" (12).

However, these fellow-servants also react very negatively to her, only responding to her obvious suffering as something 'bad'. There is clearly a stigma attached to Sarah's

⁸⁸ While Sarah's appearance reveals her past suffering, there was also a prevalence in Victorian psychology of the idea that "moral failings become transmuted into bodily signs" (see Taylor, "Nobody's Secret", 574).

appearance and behaviour, especially to Sarah's "inveterate habit ... of talking to herself" (12). We might now consider this a symptom of an anxiety disorder - or, since constantly repeated, as an obsessive-compulsion. Collins clearly includes this detail to suggest Sarah's traumatic state, perhaps revealing that many Victorians would have already recognized such a habit as a sign of overwhelming anxiety. Nevertheless, Sarah's talking to herself proves too much for her fellow-servants: rather than dismiss the habit as harmless or recognize any need to show compassion toward Sarah, Sarah's co-workers all respond to her talking to herself by becoming "suspicious" of her (12, 23 and 28).⁸⁹

The other servants in Mrs Treverton's employ therefore respond unreasonably harshly toward Sarah, not only because they misunderstand her character, but because they automatically attach a stigma to 'difference', and respond to difference with fear. After Mrs Treverton's death, the persecution of Sarah continues. As Sarah stands, stunned, beside Mrs. Treverton's bedside, she is harshly criticised by the attending nurse:

Sarah still stood--without moving or speaking, or noticing anyone--by the bedside. The nurse, approaching to draw the curtains together, started at the sight of her face, and turned to the doctor. 'I think this person had better leave the room, Sir?' said the nurse, with some appearance of contempt in her tones and looks. 'She seems unreasonably shocked and terrified by what has happened' (*The Dead Secret*, 22).

The nurse judges rather harshly that if *she* can't understand Sarah's behaviour, Sarah must therefore be reacting inappropriately, or that Sarah must be odd.⁹⁰ This particular scene therefore establishes another theme that runs throughout Collins's fiction: what some people see as worryingly 'eccentric' or 'mad' might be perfectly explainable, if the whole truth were known. One implication of such an idea is that much of the mistreatment directed toward those who are 'different' is caused by *ignorance*.⁹¹ The

⁸⁹ This reaction from the servants seems odd; it seems that they believe that if Sarah acts anxiously, she must have acted badly and be scared of being caught. However, perhaps their suspicious responses reflect the idea that abnormal mental states could be "contagious": Sarah's co-workers react to her anxiety by also becoming anxious.

⁹⁰ It can be argued that it is the nurse who is acting badly here. Despite being a nurse, she does not register that Sarah could be in shock. In his novels Collins often criticises people who he sees as small-minded: people who jump to conclusions, judge everything on superficial appearances or their sense of propriety, and who make no effort to enquire into the motivations of others.

⁹¹ Collins returns to this idea later in the novel, although through comedy. The sections featuring Andrew Treverton and his servant Shrowl contain frequent asides in which the narrator refers to the English practice of regarding someone as "eccentric" or "mad" merely because they do something that is out of fashion or that is different to what everyone else is doing. Sometimes this may be as innocuous as wearing a beard: "In the year eighteen-hundred and forty-four, the fact of a man's not shaving was regarded by the enlightened majority of the English nation as a proof of unsoundness of intellect". Collins's narrator points

contemptuous responses from other characters toward Sarah only display the short-sightedness of these characters; they never care to ask her what she has endured. It can be argued that their contempt for Sarah demonstrates their *moral blindness*; their basically abusive responses to Sarah may therefore be linked metaphorically to Leonard Frankland's blindness and his prejudices against the lower classes.

However, this particular incident does display the inherent difficulty of any attempt to read the meaning of another person's behaviour: Sarah's body and mind are 'unreadable' to the nurse. The difficulty of 'deciphering' others becomes a particular feature in Collins's work, particularly when a character is trying to determine another's sanity or insanity. This difficulty reappears, for example, in Walter Hartright's inability to judge the mental status of Anne Catherick,⁹² and in Valeria Macallan's difficulties with understanding Miserrimus Dexter.⁹³ But in Collins's novels, the characters who cannot properly read others are also often those who like to control others, or who refuse to let weaker characters tell their own story.⁹⁴

The suspicion and contempt shown to Sarah by her co-workers and by the nurses and doctors who encounter her also seems especially cruel, given the pains that Collins takes to emphasise Sarah's harmlessness and femininity. The narrator stresses that Sarah retains some elements of personal loveliness: "The trouble and fear in her voice, as she spoke, seemed to add to its sweetness; the agitation of her manner took nothing away from its habitual gentleness, its delicate, winning, feminine restraint" (12). Sarah is essentially a mild figure who would probably be liked by others if she was not perceived to be different than them. But because of her difference, she either meets with rejection or is dominated by those who are stronger than her. From the discussion above, however, it is apparent that although depicting a seriously disturbed woman, Collins does so with an unusual degree of sympathy.

Collins also takes pains to explain the reasons behind Sarah's disturbance; he does not leave them as a mystery. It is revealed that Sarah is processing a number of traumas; one is inflicted from without, while others are partially caused by her own actions. Sarah suffered the sudden death of her intended husband: not only did she lose the man she loved, but his death was unexpected and violent. She also lost this lover very soon after

to the absurdity and the ephemeral nature of such judgements, noting that the offence committed might be considered a "normal" action several years later (*The Dead Secret*, 83).

⁹² *The Woman in White* (1859-60).

⁹³ *The Law and the Lady* (1875).

⁹⁴ This is seen in *The Woman in White*: critics have noted how Laura Fairlie is reduced to a white sheet, or a blank slate, on which the villains of the novel inscribe a false identity. It can be argued that Walter Hartright does this to Laura as well.

she had fallen pregnant, and was then enticed by a more powerful person into giving up her child. Therefore, after suffering the loss of her lover, Sarah is also forced to deal with the unrelenting anxiety and guilt that follow being involved in Mrs Treverton's plot. On top of this, she faces the trauma of not bringing up her own child. Later, once Sarah is disguised as Mrs. Jazeph, she is able to see Rosamond, but she has to undergo the emotional torture of being near her child, yet being unable to reveal her true identity.⁹⁵ This torture is then compounded when her own daughter misunderstands her emotional behaviour and *joins in mistreating her*.

The early portion of *The Dead Secret* focuses on Sarah's extreme psychological conflicts. After agreeing to sign Mrs Treverton's confession, Sarah feels guilty about having been an accomplice in a crime. However, still feeling an instinctual and superstitious obligation to obey her superior, Sarah is at first intent upon carrying out her mistress's instructions to the letter. As she begins to be torn between obeying her mistress' instructions and hiding her involvement in the plot, Sarah's inner conflict becomes a huge source of anxiety. Sarah desires to hide evidence of the crime entirely – but fears supernatural retribution if she does not carry out Mrs. Treverton's wishes.

Sarah's superstitious beliefs may be intended as a marker of her lower class status, as she appears to have been in such awe of Mrs Treverton that she believes Mrs Treverton has the authority to punish her from beyond the grave (24). However, this fear is of course also an indicator of Sarah's excessive anxiety, while also being one of the more Gothic features of the novel. Sarah appears to be scared of being haunted by Mrs Treverton, and also scared of a kind of *abstract fate*. The experience of haunting (whether truly supernatural or psychologically induced) and the feeling of being enmeshed in a fatalistic plot are themes that appear repeatedly in Collins's fiction, often being subjected to questioning, but never quite being explained to satisfaction.⁹⁶

Sarah's belief that she can be punished by Mrs Treverton from beyond the grave may be exacerbated by the fact that Porthgenna Tower is an old house, considered to have a possible ghost; Mrs Treverton also made a melodramatic threat. However, that Sarah takes this threat so seriously also reveals the 'weakness' in her character, and her timidity is shown once more when she decides to run away from Porthgenna Tower rather than officially resign her position. Sarah deserts her position as she is afraid of

⁹⁵ Such a theme appears again in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). Although I am not suggesting that Ellen Wood gained the idea for this plot detail from *The Dead Secret*, it is interesting that such a scene reappears in a later sensation novel.

⁹⁶ Such fatalism dominates the plot of *Armada*, for example.

being questioned about why she is leaving or about any events surrounding her mistress's death: these questions "would be sure to confuse and terrify her" (34).

While Collins's fiction does sometimes feature what seem to be real instances of the supernatural or the uncanny, Sarah's hallucinatory experiences, during which she seems to be haunted by Mrs Treverton, function not only as a manifestation of Sarah's supernatural terror of Mrs Treverton, but seem, on a psychological level, to be prompted by the pervasive guilt she feels about her past actions. Collins did not have had such studies of psychological guilt at his disposal as we do now, and was therefore unable to theorize guilt and trauma in a "modern" way. Despite such limitations, Collins's representation of the pathologies that may be caused by trauma or by intense guilt is remarkably astute.

Interestingly, however, the reader's impression of the psychological 'realism' of Collins's depiction of Sarah's 'haunting' is probably aided by the degree to which this depiction is actually "traditional" in some ways. Collins would have been familiar with a long literary and dramatic tradition in which feelings of guilt prompt the appearance of spectres, ghosts, and hallucinations, especially in the Gothic novel and Renaissance theatre.⁹⁷ It is apparent that Sarah's trauma-induced experience of the supernatural functions as a reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; indeed, several incidents in the novel are modelled on *Hamlet*.⁹⁸ Whilst at Mrs Treverton's bedside, Sarah is made to "swear" to reveal the secret of Rosamond's parentage to Captain Treverton, but, like Hamlet, Sarah vacillates in fulfilling her sworn duty. Just as Hamlet seems to delay taking revenge, and is therefore visited by a ghost demanding he takes action, Sarah is suddenly visited by what she perceives to be a ghost, at the time when she almost dares to burn the letter containing the secret. Sarah cries to the ghost "Are you come to me already? ... Before your grave is dug? Before your coffin is made? Before your body is cold?" (26).⁹⁹ I believe that because of the reader's familiarity with Hamlet's indecisiveness and with

⁹⁷ There are a great number of examples of guilt producing hallucinations and hauntings, or other kinds of trauma in Shakespeare alone (*Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and maybe in *Hamlet*). *The Dead Secret* makes frequent references to Shakespeare (featuring many allusions to *Hamlet* and to *Timon of Athens*). The character Mrs Treverton has also been a well-known actress.

⁹⁸ This also suggests that the most important aspects of *The Dead Secret* might be its status as a dramatic story about *family* and origins, and its examination of psychology.

⁹⁹ The Shakespeare enthusiast may notice another allusion to *Hamlet* here: Sarah asks the ghost why it is appearing to her "Before your body is cold", while in *Hamlet*, Hamlet criticises his mother for remarrying before his father had been dead for two months, "nay, not so much, not two ... a little month, or ere those shoes were old/ With which she follow'd my poor father's body" (*Hamlet*, Act I, sc.2, lines 137-48; *The Oxford Shakespeare: the Complete Works*, 685-6).

Sarah shares some of Hamlet's character traits: she vacillates between conflicting ideas of what she should do, and the reader overhears her commentaries to herself in a way that is reminiscent of Hamlet's soliloquies. Like Hamlet, Sarah loses her lover.

previous dramatic representations of hauntings, Sarah's haunting seems realistic on a dramatic level, as well as seeming realistic when judged by post-Freudian standards.

While Collins's allusions to *Hamlet* suggest the possibility of reading *The Dead Secret* in ways that examine its employment of traditional symbolic registers of guilt and trauma, Collins's representation of Sarah is also of interest from a twenty-first century perspective because it seems likely that any person like Sarah who was examined by a therapist today would be diagnosed as suffering from a severe anxiety disorder. It seems most likely that she would be viewed as suffering from the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Although the term PTSD was not in use during the mid-nineteenth century, many mental health practitioners, scientists and cultural historians of the twenty-first century now view PTSD as essentially being the same disorder or condition as that referred to by the First World War concept of 'shell-shock'. If we take this into account, it would seem that the concept of PTSD was first recognized ninety-five years ago. However, there is also evidence to suggest a much greater history for the particular set of traumatic symptoms involved with PTSD. Jill Matus has recently examined how the Victorians responded to the psychological problems displayed by those who had experienced train crashes or by soldiers who had been involved in the Crimean War. She does point out that "Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome" and the closely related idea of "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome" are "historically produced categories, rather than timeless pathological entities" (Matus, "Emergent Theories of Victorian Mind Shock", 166). Therefore there could be some drawbacks to rushing to retrospectively diagnose "anguished fictional subjects as suffering from trauma" (Matus, *ibid.*, 164). However, it does clearly seem appropriate to recognize that in *The Dead Secret*, Sarah Leeson is depicted as having suffered from extreme trauma.

In addition, in recent years various psychiatrists and neuroscientists have begun to recognize the existence of a longer history of disorders related to traumatic stress. For example, in "From shell shock and war neurosis to posttraumatic stress disorder: a history of psychotraumatology", Marc-Antoine and Louis Crocq suggest that occurrences of PTSD can be found even earlier than the Victorian period. They suggest that examples of posttraumatic symptoms and nervous breakdown caused by war and persisting long after the end of combat can be found in records dating back to the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), the French Revolutionary wars (1792-1800), and even after the Battle of Marathon (440 BC) (Crocq and Crocq, "From shell shock and

war neurosis to posttraumatic stress disorder”, 47-48). Marc-Antoine and Louis Crocq clearly see these instances of combat-related stress as examples of the same kind of traumatology experienced by PTSD sufferers today, and they even make mention of incidences of PTSD occurring during the Victorian period, noting: “The Industrial Revolution and the introduction of steam-driven machinery were to give rise to the first civilian man-made disasters and cases of PTSD outside the battlefield” (Crocq and Crocq, 48). Throughout the rest of their article they delineate the history of PTSD, strongly suggesting that despite changes of terminology used to refer to traumatic symptoms (from “soldier’s heart” to “combat hysteria” to “war neurosis” and so on) the symptoms and the underlying disorder are in fact essentially the same. Moreover, Collins’s depiction of Sarah’s symptoms aligns almost exactly with the descriptors of PTSD appearing in the *DSM-IV*, which states that in order for someone to be diagnosed with PTSD, they must display the following symptoms: “intrusive recollection”, instances of avoidance or numbing, “hyper-arousal”, and significant disruptions to their functioning. The symptoms must have appeared after the individual was exposed to a particularly stressful or catastrophic event that threatened death or injury, and the duration of the stress-related symptoms must be over a period of at least a month.¹⁰⁰ However, the time Collins wrote *The Dead Secret* (1857) Victorians would have had very few terms which they could apply to Sarah: they would probably have had to refer to her as having suffered from a “nervous shock” (see Matus, *ibid.*, 168-170) or simply as being “nervous”.

With his characterization of Sarah Leeson, Collins essentially creates the first portrayal of PTSD in the English novel. Collins’s writing suggests that he was either very familiar with psychological responses to trauma, or intuited how such processes worked. His portrayal of Sarah’s psychological state involves considerable detail. Sarah shows believable symptoms of severe and uncontrolled anxiety, such as talking to herself, a changed appearance, and a heart complaint.¹⁰¹ The narrative makes it clear that she has experienced several serious traumas in fairly quick succession. When PTSD was first theorized in the twentieth century, it was believed that only experiencing *one* catastrophic event – which had to involve death or a threat of death, and a distinct feeling of helplessness in the face of the event – could prompt the development of PTSD.

¹⁰⁰ See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fourth edition), 427-9). The duration of symptoms was originally required to be six months; it was later shortened to one month.

¹⁰¹ Many individuals with PTSD suffer from cardiovascular complaints or cardiopulmonary/heart problems (van der Kolk, 139). Many Victorian soldiers seemed to understand or frame their battle fatigue/shell shock as heart disorders or rheumatism (Matus, “Emergent Theories of Victorian Mind Shock”, 166).

However, in recent years it there has been recognition that PTSD can be prompted by experiencing a string of separate traumatic events or experiencing prolonged situations of stress. This is known as Complex PTSD (van der Kolk, “Assessment and Treatment of Complex PTSD”, 130-31).¹⁰² Even though Collins did not have access to such theory, his Sarah Leeson could reasonably be interpreted as displaying either form of this anxiety disorder.

While I claim that Collins may have given us the first literary portrayal of someone suffering from PTSD, Nicholas Dames, in his recent book *Amnesiac Selves*, concludes that in *The Dead Secret*, Collins also gives us the first cultural portrayal of *amnesia* – even more amazingly, that Collins basically *invents* the modern concept of amnesia. He locates this in the characterization of Uncle Joseph (Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 172-173). Amnesia, like PTSD, can be prompted by trauma. In this case, Dames provides the example of Uncle Joseph playing his music box over and over, and while doing so, being reminded of the death of his little son (Dames, *ibid.*, 174).

Collins’s portrayal of Sarah certainly signifies a milestone in Collins’s developing ability as a ‘psychological’ novelist. In 1855, not long before the publication of *The Dead Secret*, the influential French critic Émile Forgues wrote an insightful essay in which he advised Collins how to become a better writer. Forgues’s first piece of advice was that Collins should “stop imitating the style of Dickens”. His second important proposal was that Collins should “develop more psychologically penetrating characters” (Forgues, “William Wilkie Collins”; abridged in Page, 62-66; see also Page, 12; see also Nadel, “Introduction”, ix). It may be that when writing *The Dead Secret*, Collins was responding to Forgues’s criticism,¹⁰³ since in his next novel he portrayed a woman who carries the burden of sexual shame, the stress of bereavement, the loss of her child, and guilt over deceiving her employer.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Van Der Kolk’s essay in Rachel Yehuda’s book *Treating Trauma Survivors with PTSD* registers “Separation and Loss” as one form of trauma (van der Kolk, 129), and “Secrets” as another (van der Kolk, 138). It also notes that one symptom of Complex PTSD is the individual having “chronic feelings of shame, self-blame, and and feeling permanently damaged” (van der Kolk, 128).

¹⁰³ Forgues’s essay appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in November 1855. Collins was certainly aware of Forgues’s essay. In 1859 Collins dedicated his story collection *The Queen of Hearts* to Forgues, noting that he had read Forgues’s review and had “honestly done my best to profit by it ever since” by following Forgues’s advice (see the “Letter of Dedication” in *The Queen of Hearts*, 2-3).

¹⁰⁴ In Collins’s later novel *Man and Wife* (1870) Hester Dethridge is abused by her husband and kills him. Later she suffers from hallucinations. Hester has also become mute from shock. The main heroine of *Man and Wife*, Anne Silvester, also suffers ill-treatment from her male partner. In *The Dead Secret* it is suggested that Sarah’s husband (not Hugh Polwheal) may have been abusive (107). It seems that Collins was interested in repeating variations upon similar themes throughout his career (spousal abuse, trauma, and psychological haunting).

Sarah Leeson is the first major representation in Collins's fiction of a character experiencing psychological trauma and mental disturbance; because of this, her characterization deserves far greater attention from Collins scholars and enthusiasts than it has gained. A small number of critics, including Jessica Cox, have pointed out that Sarah appears to be a forerunner to Collins's later, famous, Anne Catherick from *The Woman in White*, who also seems confused or disturbed, and who also suffers from a heart complaint (Cox, "Representations of Illegitimacy", 162). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has observed that Sarah provides an example of Collins's pervasive interest in the processes of conscience and guilt and how they can contribute to mental disease (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, 185).

At least one critic, Ira B. Nadel, suggests that Sarah's characterization is not a complete success, stating that while she begins the novel as an attractive and "compelling figure",

she distracts the reader and dulls the plot in the second half of the book because of her secondary role ... Except for her description of being haunted by the dead Mrs Treverton and her deathbed confession at the end of the novel, which successfully dramatizes why and how she hid the secret (pp. 155-6, 334-51), Sarah becomes a minor figure (Nadel, "Introduction", *The Dead Secret*, xxii).

I personally consider that Nadel's commentary underestimates Sarah's practical and symbolic importance in the novel and I would argue that Sarah's disappearance from much of the second half of *The Dead Secret* is not an artistic flaw, but that the mechanics of the plot *require* Sarah to retreat from the main story for some chapters. This allows Rosamond to be established as a heroine and to discover the secret of her birth. The novel then focuses on her search for her mother. Sarah's disappearance allows suspense to build, since, the reader, knowing that Sarah is ill, wonders whether Rosamond will reach Sarah in time, and whether Sarah will survive their meeting. Nadel does, however, admit that Sarah

is the most complex character yet to appear in Collins's fiction. Middle-aged and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, she is plagued by anxieties and insecurities. [She is] An unusual character for a Victorian novel in that her instability is so carefully detailed (Nadel, "Introduction", *The Dead Secret*, xxi).

While, as Nadel suggests, Sarah initially seems "threatening, unknown, and dangerous", and does function as "the Other" in this novel (Nadel, "Introduction", xxiii),

The Dead Secret also counters such readings by making the reader aware of Sarah's tragic past, and of the seriousness of her burdensome secret. In the second half of *The Dead Secret*, Sarah's otherness is removed once she is properly known by Rosamond, and eventually Rosamond does not see Sarah as something 'Other' or 'threatening', but knows and loves her only as her mother.

Sarah's role in *The Dead Secret*'s critique of class difference.

While Leonard Frankland's blindness and Sarah Leeson's psychological suffering initially seem to have little bearing upon one another, they come to seem very interrelated. The two narrative strands of *The Dead Secret* converge so that Rosamond's hidden ancestry gives Leonard the opportunity to overcome the class intolerance signified by his blindness.

As previously mentioned, prior commentary on *The Dead Secret* focuses mostly on illegitimacy as a social disability, and no critic has commented at length on the novel's discussions of class identity and class interaction. Collins's apparently aristocratic heroine – who is at least initially a little proud of her status – discovers that she is the daughter of a servant, and the product of sexual transgression. Rosamond's fall in social status is in itself the opposite of what might typically be expected when a Victorian novel's hero or heroine discovers a secret about their birth.

While this subverts reader expectation, the novel deals with yet another taboo when it reveals that Rosamond's birth mother suffers from anxiety and nervous exhaustion – to the point of probable mental illness. Rosamond's discovery that Sarah is her real mother therefore sets up her greatest moral test: will she accept that her mother is a physically and psychologically unwell servant, or will she repudiate her? The test of Rosamond's response to Sarah parallels the test that she faces when given the opportunity to lie to her blind husband about her birth.¹⁰⁵ Rosamond sides with the truth in both cases. Likewise, her decision to accept Sarah, despite her lower class status, her mental 'difference', and the attendant stigma, is prepared for via her prior acceptance of Leonard as a romantic partner. Rosamond displays her 'insight' by showing respect for both characters in the novel who suffer from disabling impairments.

Ira B. Nadel has noted how Sarah's revelation in the figure of Rosamond's real mother "dispossesses" Rosamond. Rosamond stands to lose her rights to live in Porthgenna

¹⁰⁵ Rosamond's opportunity to keep the truth from her husband also represents another test: will she repeat the transgression of her adopted mother, Mrs Treverton, who did deceive her husband?

Tower and maybe even to lose her marriage. Therefore, Rosamond's discovery of her mother is not necessarily a completely 'happy' one. She was not in the position of an orphan; she believed that she already knew who her parents were. Finding out about her link to Sarah may be an emotional step forward for Rosamond, but, in social terms it causes a serious loss of status.¹⁰⁶

While Nadel points out the fact of this "dispossession" and its possible threat to Rosamond, he misses the opportunity to connect this to the more symbolic role of *possession and dispossession* in the novel. Sarah Leeson is psychologically *possessed* by Mrs Treverton, having the sense of being haunted by her while suffering from hallucinations or delusional waking dreams. Likewise, Rosamond comes to be figuratively 'haunted' by the figure of her real mother, both before and after she discovers her illegitimacy.¹⁰⁷

The two most useful discussions of issues related to Rosamond's illegitimacy have been provided by articles by Jessica Cox and Jenny Bourne Taylor, and some of their points about Rosamond's illegitimacy may shed light on the novel's exploration of disability. Jessica Cox's "Representations of Illegitimacy in Wilkie Collins's Early Novels" puts forward some ideas about disability tangentially, as she looks at the legal and social difficulties created by illegitimacy. Cox explains that in Collins's fiction "the theme of illegitimacy was more than just a plot mechanism"; he also uses "illegitimacy as a figure for types of social exclusion and disenfranchisement" (Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*, 132; qtd. in Cox, *ibid.*, 151).^{108 109}

Cox differentiates Collins's treatment of illegitimacy in *Hide and Seek* from that in *The Dead Secret*, claiming that "Collins uses physical disability ... as a metaphor for

¹⁰⁶ To be completely accurate, it is *Leonard*, rather than Rosamond, who stands to lose his inheritance if it is discovered that Rosamond is illegitimate. Whereas Rosamond would no longer be the heir to Captain Treverton, Leonard's father has actually bought Porthgenna Tower from Captain Treverton, so *Leonard*, not Rosamond, is now the owner of the house. When Rosamond is found to be illegitimate, the legal system ensures that the house should become the property of Captain Treverton's brother.

¹⁰⁷ No critics of *The Dead Secret* have mentioned the doubling present in the novel: *The Dead Secret* features two mother figures for Rosamond: one who haunts Rosamond's real mother, and one who 'haunts' Rosamond, in the sense that she must be discovered by her. There is also a third 'ghost', in the "evil" looking woman who is said to haunt Porthgenna Tower (349).

¹⁰⁸ The issue of illegitimacy is explored most comprehensively in *No Name* (1862), and is of vital importance to the denouement of *The Woman in White* (1859-60); *The Woman in White* (1859-60) includes two illegitimate characters. The short story, "The Dead Hand" (1857) also focuses on illegitimacy (see Cox, "Representations of Illegitimacy", 151).

¹⁰⁹ Cox suggests that Collins's interest in illegitimacy also had an autobiographical component: "in 1869 he fathered the first of three illegitimate children by his lover Martha Rudd" (Cox, 151, 164). However, the fact that Collins would have illegitimate children several years later in his life cannot explain why, as early as 1857, he felt an "interest in illegitimacy" or why he explored this interest in his fiction. I believe it probable that Collins developed an interest in illegitimacy early in his career due to his legal studies or simply due to his interest in marginal social groups and in social justice.

social disability in *Hide and Seek*, and to indicate moral deficiencies in *The Dead Secret*, and that while *Hide and Seek* is the first novel in which Collins “depicts a character with a physical disability in positive terms” (Cox, *ibid.*, 153), he does not begin to explore “the legal aspects” of illegitimacy and the injustices associated with it until *The Dead Secret* (Cox, *ibid.*, 154). She concludes that Collins uses “disability as a metaphor” in *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret*, in order to indicate “his disapproval of society's condemnation of the illegitimate child” (Cox, *ibid.*, 165).

Cox also suggests that, as part of *The Dead Secret*'s greater focus on the social ramifications of illegitimacy, Collins creates more sympathy for Sarah Leeson than he did for *Hide and Seek*'s Mary Grice. Sarah is also punished less severely for her transgression. Although, like Mary Grice, “Sarah Leeson is also denied the opportunity of raising her daughter ... The fact that Collins does not immediately kill off the unmarried mother following the birth of her child allows him to explore in detail the effects of the severed maternal bond on her character” (Cox, *ibid.*, 161).

Cox notes that while “The effect of her lover's death and her pregnancy on Sarah's character is profound”, it is actually the loss of her child that causes the most trauma to Sarah: “it is arguably the removal of her baby by her mistress, and the concealment of the secret of her child's birth, rather than the consequences of her sexual transgression, that affect Sarah the most” (Cox, *ibid.*, 161).¹¹⁰ In contrast to Ira B. Nadel, Cox appears to find Sarah a satisfying character – calling her “one of Collins's most complex characters” - and she observes how Sarah's characterization prefigures Collins's later, compassionate treatments of suffering or disabled female characters such as “Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* and Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*” (Cox, *ibid.*, 162).

While Jenny Bourne Taylor's article “‘Nobody's Secret': Illegitimate inheritance and the uncertainties of memory” does not focus on disability, it examines the complex relationships between several Victorian texts that utilize illegitimacy as a plot line. Taylor explains how such texts display anxiety about the links between generations and about which biological, psychological and social features each generation passes down to the next.

While Taylor's article does not comment upon how *The Dead Secret* represents disability, it nevertheless suggests ways in which Rosamond's illegitimacy has

¹¹⁰ Collins's portrayal of Sarah may have been influenced by Dickens's characterization of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1852-3).

metaphorical connections to the novel's representations of disability in the figures of Leonard and Sarah. The idea that illegitimacy is a social disability adds a further dimension to *The Dead Secret*'s engagement with disability, suggesting that Rosamond may also be a 'disabled' character.

Taylor notes that during the Victorian period, the concept of illegitimacy held a place of great "cognitive and epistemological complexity" (Taylor, "Nobody's Secret", 568), and her analysis of illegitimacy and memory can also provide a framework through which to consider Sarah's experiences of seeing Mrs. Treverton's ghost (*The Dead Secret*, 26, 192-3, 350). The recurrence of illegitimacy in the Victorian novel, says Taylor, allows the novelist to consider the concept of "transgenerational haunting" (Taylor, "Nobody's Secret", 568). As I have explained, what Sarah is *really* tormented by is the memory of giving up her child, and her decision to hide Rosamond's true identity. Post-traumatic stress is in a sense, a form of haunting, and in *The Dead Secret* this haunting actually manifests in the form of a "ghost" figure'.¹¹¹

The label of illegitimacy instantly conferred otherness on the person so labelled (Taylor, *ibid.*, 570), and in many of his novels, Collins is concerned with scrutinizing such forms of social 'othering'. Sensation fiction often featured illegitimacy because this concept could be used to question various patriarchal ideas related to "the constitution of authority within the legitimate family". Illegitimacy, of course, undermined certainties about fatherhood (Taylor, *ibid.*, 569-70), and we have already seen that Collins upsets the idea of male authority in *The Dead Secret*, as Leonard is the weaker member of the novel's main couple. Moreover, in *The Dead Secret* Rosamond's illegitimacy is ultimately dismissed as unimportant: Collins neutralizes any negative moral affect that illegitimacy could be expected to have on Rosamond, and by so doing, he *questions the very relevance* of the idea of illegitimacy. This questioning of a social boundary appears similar to the way that the novel also questions social norms surrounding the class structure.

¹¹¹ Some parts of *The Dead Secret* explore the idea that Porthgenna Tower may be haunted by a ghost. This ghost is heard making noises (192-3, 349). It is said to be the ghost of a woman who was morally loose, and considered to be wicked. At one point she appears in a hidden photo frame (349). The ghost may symbolise an amalgamation of the two 'mother'/female figures of Mrs. Treverton and Sarah Leeson: both have transgressed, via deception and illicit sexuality, respectively.

Conclusion.

Early on in *The Dead Secret*, Rosamond complains of her husband Leonard's attempts to make her conform to her place in the class structure and to avoid friendly interaction with those lower than her in class terms. Not agreeing with the validity of his argument, Rosamond exclaims:

“We don't seem to have been created with such very wide distinctions between us. We have all got the same number of arms and legs; we are all hungry and thirsty, and hot in the summer and cold in the winter; we all laugh when we are pleased, and cry when we are distressed; and surely, we have all got very much the same feelings, whether we are high or whether we are low” (*The Dead Secret*, 73).

This is one of the key messages of *The Dead Secret*, as the novel seeks to emphasise the similarities between people of different social standing. In a parallel and very similar argument, it also denies the idea that more unusual people, such as the illegitimate, the disabled, or the mentally disturbed should be treated as ‘the Other’.

The Dead Secret is dominated by representation of and anxiety about social responses to ‘the Other’. Society responds with disdain to Sarah Leeson due to her unusual behaviour, Leonard fears that Rosamond will reject him romantically once he becomes blind, while Rosamond in turn lives in fear of Leonard's response to her discovery that she is illegitimate and of a lower class. However, Collins shows a particular interest in the well-being of Sarah Leeson, who, as a servant, a woman, and someone who is psychologically traumatized, would be among those most powerless in Victorian society. He shows compassion in response to Sarah's having been pregnant when her lover died, and in response to the ill-use she receives from a man she later marries (107), and he makes use of elements of the “female Gothic”¹¹² in order to bolster the interest of the novel's detective story, to develop Rosamond's relationship with Sarah, and to ensure their reunion.

In this novel, Collins creates links between illegitimacy, social disability, physical disability, and classism. *The Dead Secret* sometimes represents disability figuratively, with Leonard's physical disability signifying his classism and illegitimacy also being a form of disability. However, *The Dead Secret* also represents Leonard's and Sarah's disabilities in a naturalistic fashion, and by so doing, the novel makes these two forms of

¹¹² The “female gothic”, as Tamar Heller and Alison Milbank have explained, often focuses on a female character's discoveries about her origins; very often, this search is centered on the mother.

disability seem less alien. The blind male character is able to marry, and he is presented as a stable personality, breaking the tradition of representing the blind as pathologically jealous or suspicious. Meanwhile, Sarah's mental instability is explained as largely arising from her experience of traumatic events. Various examples of her eccentricity are revealed to lack any menace, and to fail as proofs of her 'madness'. Her eccentricities are harmless coping mechanisms to combat her anxiety, and she is revealed to be a very loving mother. Ultimately, the reader will probably be guided by Rosamond's final acceptance of Sarah, and come to care about Sarah. Additionally, a final normalization of otherness occurs when the illegitimate child, Rosamond, is shown to be reasonable, moral, and charitable.

The way that people respond to those they would usually regard as 'the Other' is one of the novel's major concerns. Because this concern is so central to the novel's plot, it is ludicrous to consider Leonard's blindness as merely a contrivance for allowing Rosamond to explore their house. Neither is Leonard's psychological portrait as thin as has been asserted. Meanwhile, far from being a "distraction" throughout *The Dead Secret*, Sarah Leeson lies at the very heart of the novel: she is the true mother who Rosamond is looking for, she is the instigator and keeper of the novel's 'secret', and she epitomizes the novel's final acceptance of forms of alterity. It is because Sarah is so central to the plot mechanics and meaning of *The Dead Secret* that Collins took extra pains with her characterization.

Previous scholarly analyses of *The Dead Secret* differ greatly from my own due to their focus on illegitimacy and social disability rather than on Leonard's blindness or Sarah's trauma. However, it is apparent from my study that Collins's attempts to neutralize the stigma attached to illegitimacy both parallel and work hand in hand with his attempts to neutralize the stigma attached to mental and physical disability.

The Dead Secret moves away from the practice of othering and pathologizing those who appear to be abnormal, and implies that either greater tolerance or greater understanding of 'non-normative' people – whether disabled or illegitimate – is needed. Collins depicts a marriage between a blind man and a sighted woman, depicts an illegitimate child and her mother in positive terms, and incorporates a vision of democratic and friendly class relations into *The Dead Secret*. Collins not only makes a call for greater understanding of the disabled, but also asks for a similar change in how the middle and upper classes view those of a lower social standing. *The Dead Secret*

functions admirably as a mystery novel, but its greater value is as a text that looks seriously at physical, mental, and social forms of disability.

POOR MISS FINCH (1871-2):

The blind leading the blue.

‘I subscribe to the article of belief which declares, that the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction, and that it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness. These are the views which "Poor Miss Finch" is intended to advocate’ (Collins, “Dedication” letter addressed to ‘Mrs Elliott, of the Deanery, Bristol’, *Poor Miss Finch*, xxxiii).

With *Poor Miss Finch*, as with *Hide and Seek*, Wilkie Collins attempts to produce a medically and psychologically accurate depiction of a particular disability, this time depicting the unusual psychological effects associated with a young woman’s blindness, and depicting her experience of undergoing cataract surgery. *Poor Miss Finch* is an innovative novel in which Collins moves toward a medicalized, materialized, and secularized representation of disability. This form of representation of a blind person and their experiences had not previously been attempted in British literature. In a brief dedicatory note that Collins wrote to his friend ‘Mrs Elliot’ to accompany the novel,¹¹³ he states that with *Poor Miss Finch* his aims are to present “blindness as it really is” and to demonstrate that happiness does not depend on having a physically perfect body (Collins, “To Mrs Elliot”, *Poor Miss Finch*, xxxiii). Collins also mentioned in another private letter that he intended the novel to have a “consolatory” message (Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Volume II*, 315).¹¹⁴ It appears, therefore, that as with *Hide and Seek*, with *Poor Miss Finch* Collins intended to demonstrate that life with a disability could not only be tolerable, but happy, and that in fact the presence of a disability might actually contribute to an individual’s happiness.

*Poor Miss Finch*¹¹⁵ is one of Wilkie Collins’s lesser-known novels, and has received only a small amount of critical attention. My purpose in writing about it is to suggest ways that criticism of this novel might take more account of the innovative nature of Collins’s depictions of blindness and epilepsy. Collins represents blindness via two different registers. For example, by paying close attention to various scientific sources about blindness, and at least one anecdotal source, and using them to inform his

¹¹³ The ‘Mrs Elliot’ in question is the writer Frances Minto Elliot.

¹¹⁴ Collins’s letter to Arthur Locker, dated 18 January 1872. In Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *Volume II*, 314-315. Collins explains that he cannot give Locker’s blind friend any information about contacting Herr Grosse. Locker’s friend has read only some of the instalments of *Poor Miss Finch* and does not realise that Lucilla’s operation is ultimately unsuccessful. Collins tells Locker: “my readers will discover that she relapses into total blindness, and that her blindness and her happiness are made to be conditional one on the other. I have written the book expressly to show that happiness can exist independently of bodily affliction” (Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Volume II*, 315).

¹¹⁵ *Poor Miss Finch* began its serialization in *Cassell’s Magazine* on 2 September 1871 (Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *Volume II*, 277).

portrayals of blindness and epilepsy, Collins creates literary depictions of blindness and epilepsy in ways that were new to literature, because they are so medically and scientifically accurate. Collins also takes note of the traditionally symbolic meanings of blindness and epilepsy. However, he disrupts them in unusual ways, as part of his purpose of communicating his positive beliefs about disability.

Some previous criticism of *Poor Miss Finch* has recognized the accuracy of Collins's representations of blindness and epilepsy, and that this accuracy relies on his close reproduction of information he gained from scientific resources. It has also been noted that his representation of Lucilla is radical in the way that it shows a disabled woman who is sexual and who marries happily. However, critics have not fully considered how the messages delivered in *Poor Miss Finch* fit in to the larger picture of those messages about disability that Collins repeatedly communicated throughout his career. *Poor Miss Finch* not only contains a blind female character who is sexualised and who functions as romantic heroine; it also argues for an acknowledgement of the human rights of the disabled and their desires for self-actualisation and autonomy. In this regard, *Poor Miss Finch* carries on a message communicated in *Hide and Seek* and developed further in *The Dead Secret*, and which appears again in the later novel *The Law and the Lady*.

Poor Miss Finch contains a highly sympathetic portrayal of an adult woman, Lucilla Finch, who has been blind since infancy. Once again, Collins's aim with this representation is to portray a person's experience of a sensory disability and the psychological and practical effects that this disability has on them in a way that could be recognised as accurate and which would reduce public ignorance about the disability. With *Poor Miss Finch* Collins largely repeats the method he had used when writing *Hide and Seek*, ensuring his work is informed by medical documents and case studies. It is Lucilla's disability that is at the centre of the novel, but *Poor Miss Finch* also contains a representation of the onset, effects, and treatment of *another* disability, epilepsy. Again, Collins appears to have researched this disability in some detail. Meanwhile, *Poor Miss Finch* appears to rely on different sources of information about blindness than does *The Dead Secret*; in any case, it reaches a deeper analysis of the experience of blindness than is achieved in the earlier novel.

In his dedicatory note addressed to 'Mrs. Elliot', Collins makes no mention of the earlier depiction of blindness in *The Dead Secret*. This may suggest that he recognized that his depiction of Leonard Frankland was not as innovative as what he was now attempting. Leonard is not the major character in *The Dead Secret*, so in this regard,

Poor Miss Finch already involves a greater challenge of representation. However, perhaps the most important difference between the two novels that feature a blind character is the gender of each character: *Poor Miss Finch* is about a woman.

From Collins's own comments on *Poor Miss Finch* it seems that his main motivation for writing about a blind young woman was to counter the sentimental, non-scientific representations of blind girls and women that proliferated in literature and drama. Meanwhile, *Poor Miss Finch* takes up the issue of the marriage of a disabled woman that is raised in *Hide and Seek*, but pushes it further, to a conclusion where Lucilla, the disabled heroine, actually is married.

Critical responses.

Despite Collins's assurance to readers about the innovative nature of his depiction of Lucilla Finch, not all literary critics of the time were particularly positive about *Poor Miss Finch*, and it has only been in recent years that a handful of scholars have conducted serious critical discussions of the novel.¹¹⁶

During the nineteenth century, the major negative response was to the plotline surrounding Lucilla and her marriage. The second negative response, which persisted into the twentieth century, regarded details of Oscar's epilepsy and his blue face. Some Victorian reviewers criticised Lucilla's forwardness as she actively tries to manage her relationship with Oscar; she is not a passive heroine. In addition to this, Lillian Nayder notes, many contemporary reviewers regarded Oscar's blue face as silly. Whereas recent critics, especially Nayder, have now recognised that Collins used Oscar's skin discolouration to deliver an allegory about racism, Victorian readers simply dismissed his blue face as "an incidental if startling plot device introduced solely to confuse the readers" (see Anonymous, *Canadian Monthly and National Review* 1, 477-79, discussed in Nayder, "'Blue Like Me': Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, and the Construction of Racial Identity", 270; or, see Page, 200). Nayder notes that even Collins's recent biographer Catherine Peters regards Oscar's blue skin as a "superficial" absurdity or a plot contrivance (Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, xvi; qtd. in Nayder, "'Blue Like Me'", 270).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ I discuss the work of seven modern critics. This is a very small amount of criticism in comparison to the number of academics who have written about *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

¹¹⁷ Nayder refers to Peters's "Introduction" to *Poor Miss Finch*. However, Nayder does recognise that in this "Introduction" Peters says seemingly contradictory things about the believability of *Poor Miss Finch*. This occurs again in *The King of Inventors*, when Peters states that the novel's plot does not "stand up to assessment by the criteria of realism", and mentions Oscar's turning blue as an example of this. But Peters then states in a footnote that "As usual, Wilkie did his research", and quotes from a Victorian source that mentions nitrate of silver as an epilepsy treatment which turns the skin blue (*The King of Inventors*, 327).

Martha Stoddard Holmes observes that after the late 1890s *Poor Miss Finch* suffered a serious decline in popularity and faded into obscurity. However, she feels that this is largely attributable to the assumptions and value systems that lie behind many of the negative critical responses. Stoddard Holmes (who has written three different studies of *Poor Miss Finch*) concludes that, in its Victorian context, Collins's novel was too progressive in its depiction of female sexuality to have enduring commercial success or a long cultural life. Having compared *Poor Miss Finch* to more conventional representations of disabled women, Holmes finds that it was the more conventional stories that denied disabled women any outlet of sexuality or marriage that became and remained popular. Therefore, *Poor Miss Finch*'s naturalistic treatment of blindness, and its acceptance that a disabled girl could marry happily, probably worked against it, because it does not match with what were the prevailing "nineteenth-and twentieth-century cultural orientations toward 'different' bodies and beliefs about the appropriate place of disabled women in the realms of sexuality, marriage, and reproduction". While the question of "what kind of future, in love or work, awaited a young woman with an exceptional body" interested other popular writers apart from Collins (Stoddard Holmes, "Bolder with her Lover in the Dark", 60), Collins was the only well-known writer who went further than simply asking whether a disabled woman should marry, and who "radically replotted disabled women's sexual and reproductive 'place' in at least three of his novels, transgressing not only the barrier of marriage but also that of childbearing". As Stoddard Holmes notes, Collins "never pathologizes a disabled woman's entry, through marriage and motherhood, into ... domestic life" (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 61).

Therefore, Stoddard Holmes views Collins as an iconoclast, and stresses the (ongoing) unusualness of "*Poor Miss Finch*'s core narrative of a blind woman falling in love, marrying, and having children – without first being 'cured'" (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 60). While *Poor Miss Finch* did not do especially well critically and commercially, this may reflect that it was out of step with popular ideas of its time.

While some evaluations of *Poor Miss Finch* have provided useful insights, there are other elements of this novel that appear to have been overlooked by critics. In this chapter I aim to rectify some of these omissions. In order to prepare for my new readings, I shall first discuss some of the literary, artistic and medical background to representations of blindness in *Poor Miss Finch*.

The source mentioned by Peters is Thomas Wilson, M.D., *Lectures on the Principles and Practice of Physic*, London, 1857.

How Collins responded to previous literary and artistic depictions of blindness, and made use of contemporaneous scientific knowledge.

There have always been philosophical assumptions linked to the phenomena of blindness. For many centuries preceding the publication of *Poor Miss Finch*, artistic depictions of blindness tended to conform to either of two approaches. Blindness could be used to suggest the figure of a blind prophet or “seer”: someone who possessed divine or unusual wisdom despite being blind. The prophet Teiresias is an example of such a character in ancient literature. Later, John Milton was used as a ‘real life’ example of a blind ‘seer’; a poetic image of blind wisdom. This idea of the blind person representing “a figure for insight and morality” continued during the nineteenth century in “Romantic and Neo-Classical painting” (Mirzoeff, “Blindness and Art”, 391).

However, running parallel to, or perhaps countering this idea was the metaphorical use of blindness to symbolize the *lack* of insight that a character had when they were sighted; their consequent blinding acted as a punishment for this moral or spiritual blindness. For example, in Euripides’ *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus’s eventual blindness signifies his inability to perceive the truth about his origins, while Gloucester’s blinding in *King Lear* manifests the fact that he lacked insight into the relative value of his sons; he stumbled when he ‘saw’.

Wilkie Collins’s representation of Leonard Frankland in *The Dead Secret* appears to show an awareness of these traditions, although the latter tradition is subverted a little, in that the physical blindness that Leonard *currently* experiences also represents his concurrent ‘blindness’ about the worth of people from other classes. In *Poor Miss Finch* Collins again shows an awareness of such traditions, and his characterization of Lucilla both utilizes and departs from these previously established symbolic meanings of blindness. Collins *does* depict Lucilla as lacking insight in one specific regard. This lack does arise partly because of her disability, and does play a key role in the narrative. However, rather than interact too closely with old symbolic associations of blindness, Collins’s main interest with his representation of Lucilla is to create a psychologically and medically accurate representation of blindness and to consider its possible psychological effects. In general, *Poor Miss Finch*’s scientific approach actually debunks some of the ‘mythical’ ideas about blindness that accrued due to such symbolic representations of blindness or to popular folk beliefs.

Previous criticism of *Poor Miss Finch* has successfully identified some (if not all) of the scientific sources of information that Collins used when writing the novel. The case

studies that Collins examined about the experiences of blind people focused primarily on the responses of people who recovered their sight after having been blind. Surprisingly, several of these studies narrate the stories of patients who actually responded *negatively* to having recovered their sight: these patients were unhappy with or overwhelmed by their new ability; they preferred having been blind. Such unusual details may have inspired elements of the characterization and plotting of *Poor Miss Finch*, especially as they seem to back up his consolatory message that blindness is not such a terrible affliction.

After having conducted such reading, Collins was in the position of being able to defend the veracity of his depiction of blindness and its psychological effects, and he could point to his source documents for ‘proof’ that it was possible for a patient to experience a negative response to regaining sight. This reading would also have made Collins aware of some of the philosophical questions that had been posited about the ways in which the blind could process new information and how they respond to various stimuli. Collins attempts to grapple with some of these questions in *Poor Miss Finch*.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century discussions of blindness were dominated by a range of recurring philosophical questions, some of which seemed impossible to answer, such as the question which asked whether it would be worse to be blind or to be deaf. Throughout the nineteenth century, this question came to be answered in terms favourable to blindness:

despite the physical limitations of blindness, it was seen as less morally debilitating than other sensory loss. In particular, the blind came to be seen as superior to the deaf – in the minds of the hearing and seeing – and to be endowed with special moral qualities (Mirzoeff, 389).

How society decided to answer this question held important consequences for how the blind and the deaf were considered by medical authorities and by the public. It was decided that the deaf person’s inability to take in knowledge aurally meant that they could not acquire and process anywhere near as much knowledge as other people could, and that this must limit their degree of intelligence: “the loss of hearing was held to entail the loss of voice and hence of thought” (Mirzoeff, 389). It was supposed that the deaf were “without language” and therefore could not develop complex thought or complex cognitive processes, whereas the blind could acquire a greater degree of knowledge since they were capable of understanding language aurally.

However, some scientists and philosophers also asked questions about the blind which revealed doubt about the ability of the blind to perceive things at a high intellectual level. Some even questioned whether a blind person was “fully human” since there were fundamental things they could not understand. For example, it was asked whether a blind person would be born with a pre-existing sense of beauty, and if not, whether they would ever be able to acquire or maintain any idea of the beautiful (see Gautier, “Du Beau dans l’Art”, *L’Art moderne*, 157; qtd. in Mirzoeff, “Blindness and Art”, 395). If sight was needed to understand beauty, perhaps the blind could never understand beauty (Mirzoeff, 395).

Sensualist philosophers believed that “the mind was formed directly from sensory experience”; this led to the belief that “those with differing senses had different minds” (Mirzoeff, 384). Therefore, the blind must have very different minds than anyone who was sighted. Denis Diderot believed that “The person born blind perceived things in a far more abstract manner than us” (Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 4, 32; qtd. in Mirzoeff, 385), and even reached the conclusion that the fewer senses one had, the less moral one would be (Diderot, *ibid.*, 27; qtd. in Mirzoeff, 384-85). While this idea sounds shocking today, one can see how the conclusion that blind person could only lead a circumscribed existence might have appeared unavoidable if one believed that all experience and knowledge stem from information provided by our senses and our mental processing of such information.

However, as is apparent from *Hide and Seek*, nineteenth-century science was also interested in the idea of sensory compensation. For example, it was commonly believed that the blind have sharper hearing than the average person. In “Blindness and Art”, Nicholas Mirzoeff describes this idea as a myth that developed from “the medical theory of the spirits” : “as the body has a finite number of spirits to enable the senses the loss of one sense leaves more spirits available for the others and they are enhanced” (Mirzoeff, 383-84). It is in fact uncertain whether this belief is ‘mythical’ or not, as even in recent years scientific findings relating to the area of sensory compensation have been highly ambiguous. Despite uncertainty about the scientific truth of such matters, throughout history people have often been interested in the idea that the loss of one sense might result in the development of compensatory mechanisms as a means of balancing out the body’s abilities.

Collins does explore this idea of a compensatory inflation of the remaining senses, as Lucilla claims to have an especially sensitive sense of touch. For example, “Lucilla

believes she can feel colours” and that she is able to “distinguish Oscar from his brother” Nugent due to a tingle that runs through her when she touches him (see Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, 110, and *Poor Miss Finch*, 147-48). Her claims about this occasionally seem to be true. However, while Lucilla claims that she can “read colours” via her touch, this special sense of touch sometimes fails her. If she has developed highly sensitive touch as a compensation for being blind, its sensitivity is only intermittently reliable. Collins also complicates the idea of simple “compensation”, since Lucilla’s extra sensitive touch could sometimes be explained as a sensual attraction to Oscar, or as a comment upon the theory of “animal magnetism”. When the sensitivity to touch seems acute, however, it makes Lucilla aware of unexpected differences, which actually often indicates that other characters are deliberately hiding things from her.¹¹⁸

Collins also uses *Poor Miss Finch* to repudiate negative beliefs about the limited intellectual capacity of the blind by discussing how Lucilla imagines or perceives colours and how she constructs imaginative visual pictures. He also goes into detail regarding the changes to her cognitive processes after she regains her sight.

While some questions were being asked about the limitations effected by blindness, other nineteenth-century scientific developments suggested that the “normal” and the “pathological” were not as clearly distinguishable as science and society had liked to suggest. Nicholas Mirzoeff writes that “In the second half of the eighteenth century, medical science began to categorize blindness ‘as a pathological state of the body, in distinction to the normal condition of sight’. However, various classifications ‘among the ranks of the pathological’ blurred these distinctions” (Mirzoeff, 389).

In *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins does focus on one negative consequence of Lucilla’s blindness, her psychological aversion to dark colours. The discussion of this negative consequence plays a role in *Poor Miss Finch*’s attempt to portray “blindness as it really is”. One particularly odd effect of Lucilla’s blindness is her fear of dark-skinned people. Nugent Dubourg, the villainous brother of Oscar, the novel’s ‘hero’, theorizes that Lucilla’s fear of dark colours and dark skin is “a fanciful growth, a morbid accident, of her blindness” (*Poor Miss Finch*, 154). This seems to be correct, as Lucilla’s blindness causes her mind to mislead her as to the appearance and fearfulness of various objects. This fear of dark colours is both a part of the novel’s straight representation of the

¹¹⁸ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests that “Lucilla’s blindness brings to the fore how vision is inextricably bound to the nervous system and to sense perceptions, more than actually displaying the anatomical mechanisms of sight” (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, 108).

psychological effects of blindness, *and* may be interpreted as metaphorically related to racial concerns. I shall discuss the importance of this aversion in more detail later in this section.

In these representations of possible psychological effects of blindness, Collins draws heavily on scientific sources. The way that Lucilla, after her operation, needs to learn how to ‘interpret’ what she sees draws upon the experimental findings of William Carpenter:

One of the cases of ‘recovered sight’ that he mentioned in his *Principles of Mental Physiology* was a case of congenital cataract in which, like Lucilla, a nine-year-old boy had to shut his eyes after his operation to apprehend distance (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine, and the Gothic*, 114-115).¹¹⁹

Catherine Peters notes that *Poor Miss Finch* also incorporates information about blindness from sources as diverse as John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, George Berkeley’s *The Theory of Vision*, Denis Diderot’s *Lettres sur les Aveugles*, and William Cheselden’s *Philosophical Transactions* (Peters, “Introduction”, *Poor Miss Finch*, viii-xi).

Lucilla’s experiences with eye surgery and with learning to see again closely mirror Cheselden’s 1728 account of removing “cataracts from the eyes of a boy of about 13 who had been blind since infancy” (Peters, “Introduction”, *Poor Miss Finch*, ix). Among “many borrowings” from Cheselden’s account “are Lucilla’s preference for white and scarlet, and her disappointment with the reality of colours ... also her horror of dark colours” and “her inability to distinguish the cat from the dog” (Peters, “Introduction”, xi). Meanwhile, reference to Collins’s letters reveals that it was Charles Reade who provided Collins with the idea that the blind might experience a heightened sense of touch (Baker, Gasson, Law and Lewis, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Volume II*, 300).¹²⁰

As with *Hide and Seek*, Collins was concerned to ensure that his portrayal of a sensory disability was scientifically accurate. However, despite the attention he gives to explaining some of the more unusual or negative effects of Lucilla’s blindness, the major aim of this accurate and ‘naturalistic’ representation was the demystification of blindness,

¹¹⁹ Talairach-Vielmas refers to an example given on page 180 of William Carpenter’s *Principles of Mental Physiology with their Applications to the Training and Discipline of the Mind and the Study of its Morbid Conditions* (Fourth edition, 1889).

¹²⁰ The letter to Charles Reade is dated 19 November 1871. Reade had obviously provided Collins with some information (the source of which has not been established) and Collins tells Reade that he “shall certainly use” the extracts provided.

and to deliver the message that blindness is not a pathological state. His writing normalizes Lucilla, in the sense that her blindness is never presented as itself constituting a huge problem in her life or as being a particularly disturbing state. Moreover, Lucilla is presented as having generally the same emotions and interests as any sighted woman.

Even apart from the concerted emphasis on scientific realism, Collins's depiction of a blind woman was remarkably different from other Victorian representations of blind women, due to its lack of sentimentality. Lucilla is not a pitiful figure who we are encouraged to lament over, or alternatively, to feel inspired by. Victorian literature commonly suggested that the life purpose of a woman with a physical disability was

to generate emotion and moral development in others by being innocent and saintly, surprisingly cheerful, justifiably melancholy, tragically frustrated from achieving her goals as a woman, suicidal or dead – *or simply by being disabled*, without any of these other conditions (Holmes, ““Bolder with her Lover””, 60, my emphasis; also qtd. in Flint, “Disability and Difference”, 55).

Poor Miss Finch avoids such a representation of a disabled woman. Lucilla Finch is a feisty and fully rounded character. She is not saintly, melancholy, or perpetually frustrated, and her role consists of more than simply provoking virtuous and pathetic feelings in others.

The failure of Lucilla's eye surgery.

Lucilla Finch undergoes eye surgery and regains her sight, only for her sight to fail soon afterward, leaving her blind once more. While readers might suspect that one convenience of the failure of her surgery is to allow Lucilla to avoid having to actually see Oscar's blue skin, Collins is actually faithful to his scientific sources when he depicts Lucilla's reversion to blindness. His novel's representation of Lucilla's cataract surgery and its after-effects resembles Cheselden's account of performing cataract surgery (1728), and his discussion of the results. Later in this chapter I shall also argue that much of the detail of Lucilla's blindness seems to be based on the life story of a blind and deaf man, James Mitchell. In either the late 1860s or early 1870s, the periodical *Chambers's Miscellany*¹²¹ published an article discussing the cataract surgery undergone by James Mitchell. Mitchell's story was also mentioned, in less detail, in John Kitto's *The Lost Senses*, a book

¹²¹ The volume I used is undated, but various websites for antiquated books suggest that this particular volume of *Chambers's Miscellany* (the 'New and revised Edition', Volume III) was published c. 1870-1. Some other volumes that may match this set are listed as published in 1869. In either case, this tract seems to have been published before Collins began work on *Poor Miss Finch*, and the information it contains dates back to observations made as early as 1810 and 1811.

that Collins had assuredly read. It is likely that Collins became aware of Mitchell's story either through Kitto's account, through the *Chambers's Miscellany* article, or through the original documents which that article relied upon. Collins's probable reliance on the biography of Mitchell has not been noted by previous critics of *Poor Miss Finch*.

Lucilla's eye surgery is ultimately, not effective. *Poor Miss Finch* places some of the blame for this failure on the psychological stresses affecting Lucilla's physiological functioning after her eye surgery. Lucilla suffers stress from the deceptions carried out by Nugent and Oscar (see Sparks, "Narrative Injury and Surgical Cure", 5). Herr Grosse tells Lucilla and her friends to maintain a stress-free environment for several weeks, to aid Lucilla's recovery, but this environment is not maintained. Moreover, due to her impatience to view Oscar and to experience nature, Lucilla removes her bandages too early, and overworks her 'new eyes' (*Poor Miss Finch*, 255-7; 360-363; 371-372; 411-412).

However, the text also implies that the surgery Lucilla undergoes was very unlikely to ever effect a permanent improvement. Some details suggest that it involves only 'couching' for cataracts. This was in fact the most common form of cataract surgery at the time, but was an old-fashioned procedure, which involved cutting into the cataract and sliding the parts of the cataract away from the front of the eye, not completely removing the cataract. In effect, it is really a half-hearted effort at a 'cure'.¹²² Meanwhile, the two wildly differing opinions about Lucilla's likelihood of seeing given by Doctors Sebright and Grosse, and the eventual failure of the surgery, also seem to repeat Collins's tendency (also apparent in *The Dead Secret* and *Hide and Seek*) to depict doctors as ordering ineffectual treatments.

A radical presentation of a disabled woman's sexuality.

While Collins's heavy reliance on scientific findings for his depiction of blindness is unusual for the time period, even more radical is his novel's forthright portrayal of Lucilla's sexuality. This aspect of the novel has been discussed very fully by Martha Stoddard Holmes in three different articles or book chapters dealing either solely or

¹²² Mary Wilson Carpenter states that it is likely that Herr Grosse "has merely couched congenital cataracts" (Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 147). This means that he has not conducted the most invasive and comprehensive cataract surgery possible. It does seem likely that Grosse "couches" Lucilla's cataracts if the representation of her operation is partially based on the account of James Mitchell's eye surgery. In the biography of Mitchell, it is mentioned that Mitchell's surgeon "couched" his eye, rather than remove the lens ("Anecdotes of the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind", *Chambers's Miscellany*, p. 9). Since this was an old-fashioned form of surgery, this seems to contradict Herr Grosse's confidence that he can cure Lucilla's blindness completely, and his assurance that he is in the avant garde of ocular science.

largely with *Poor Miss Finch*. Together, these three pieces of writing provide the most valuable academic discussions of *Poor Miss Finch* currently available. Her first article, titled “The Twin Structure: Disabled Women in Victorian Courtship Plots”, discusses many Victorian medical and cultural issues related to female disability, and briefly considers Lucilla’s representation in relation to Collins’s earlier depictions of women with disabilities. Stoddard Holmes discusses Lucilla at more length in the later article “‘Bolder with Her Lover in the Dark’: Collins and Disabled Women’s Sexuality”, and in her book, *Fictions of Affliction*. Her prevailing focus is on Collins’s message that a disabled person could have a fulfilling sexual or romantic life.

Stoddard Holmes summarizes the plot of *Poor Miss Finch* thus: Lucilla Finch “regains and re-loses her vision, narrowly escapes marrying the wrong man, marries the right one, has babies, and lives happily ever after” (Stoddard Holmes, “‘Bolder With Her Lover’”, 58). Stoddard Holmes notes that this is a highly unusual plotline in Victorian fiction, because it is a *disabled* woman who is marrying, having children, and remaining happy. Most Victorian literature insists that disability places “a woman character on the margins of the plot”, and “produces the consistent message that disability, almost by definition, removes or diverts a young woman from the normative sexual economy”. Moreover, on the rare occasions that Victorian fiction shows “physically disabled women” as being married and having children, the woman are always marked by “passionlessness”, and almost never give birth to children themselves, but “become mothers through adoption” (Stoddard Holmes, “‘Bolder With her Lover’”, 60-61). *Poor Miss Finch* exists in sharp contrast to these examples, as Lucilla is extremely passionate, she gets married, and the children she eventually has are her own biological children.

Poor Miss Finch suggests that it is acceptable – even normal - for a blind woman to be married and to give birth. Moreover, the novel made this suggestion at a time when prevailing scientific beliefs made this a controversial subject. As Martha Stoddard Holmes explains, “As a Victorian cultural sign, disability pointed not only backward, to parental transgression and defect, but even more urgently forward, to future generations”. The biblical category of the “unclean” had eventually developed “into the social-scientific category of the dysgenic or degenerative”, and there was a common social and scientific belief that “‘Beauty, Health, and Intellect Result from Certain Unions, and Deformity, Disease, and Insanity from Others,’ as Alexander Walker’s influential 1838 text *Intermarriage* so memorably capsulizes it” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 68). Scientists were still trying to figure out how specific disabilities and illnesses were

passed down to the next generation, and by placing a disabled woman in a “heroine’s role”, Collins created “a reminder of significant anxieties surrounding impairment itself and the uncertain rules by which it might pass from person to person” (Stoddard Holmes, “‘Bolder With Her Lover’”, 62).

However, in *Poor Miss Finch* there is no narrative emphasis whatsoever on the idea that Lucilla’s children might inherit her blindness (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 88). This omission seems to signal that Collins believed the risks of transmission were small or that they should be deemed irrelevant by society. It may even indicate that Collins believed that if blindness were passed on, it was not a particularly terrible disability. Instead of replicating fears about the risk of such hereditary impairment, in *Poor Miss Finch* Lucilla’s “desires are both reciprocated and approved ... making her rare among disabled women characters and unheard of among blind ones” (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 84).

Stoddard Holmes concludes that “Collins goes further than any other writer of the period in his willingness to test melodramatic plotting as a framework for exploring disabled women’s ability to love, marry, and bear children” (Stoddard Holmes, *ibid.*, 75), and she praises Collins’s ability to move “beyond the pathetic ‘if only’ narrative structure’ that Victorian culture had typically used to pathologize disabled women’s wishes ‘to be wives and mothers” (Stoddard Holmes, “‘Bolder With Her Lover’”, 62).

In the twenty-first century, the idea of transmitting congenital ailments, diseases, or propensities is still a major concern. It is telling that in a culture that was similarly concerned with the hereditary transmission of various conditions and ‘defects’, *Poor Miss Finch* appears to side with the idea of not being overly concerned with such risks, and not being overly alarmed by disability itself.

Disability paves the way for transgressive behaviour.

While traditionally, disability is usually depicted as limiting a person’s abilities to act, part of Collins’s representation of Lucilla involves demonstrating some ways in which Lucilla’s disability actually allows her some advantages. For example, Lucilla’s blindness makes it more acceptable for her to engage in what would be considered transgressive social and sexual behaviour. Lucilla is not merely presented as openly desiring Oscar, but she also pro-actively ‘chases’ Oscar (she seems determined that Oscar should not get away, and not being so hindered by social expectations as the sighted are, she perceives no reason why *she* should not instigate the relationship).

Madame Pratolungo witnesses the way Lucilla approaches Oscar and considers Lucilla to be taking inappropriate “liberties”. While this behaviour appals Madame Pratolungo, she surmises that Lucilla acts this way because her blindness prevents her from having developed any sense of embarrassment (37, 59). Because Lucilla cannot see that others are shocked by her behaviour, she has a strong lack of self-consciousness. She never witnessed examples of decorous female behaviour, and has no knowledge that she is expected to rein in her romantic inclinations. While this fact is presented in the guise of being a revelation about a blind woman’s psychology, in practical terms it means that Lucilla’s disability gives her an excuse to behave in a manner that would usually be disapproved of. Of course, Collins also implies that perhaps such behaviour is actually *natural* to women, but women have been socialized away from it. Because Lucilla acts with great candour, she is unconsciously able to escape the confines of the gender roles that were traditional for women. Women were expected to be the passive recipient of admiration from men. Lucilla’s disability could have been expected to make her *more* passive or quiet; instead it allows her to escape such rules. It is here that the significance of Lucilla’s last name is revealed: finches were domesticated birds which were often kept in cages,¹²³ yet Lucilla acts as she wishes – she is not trapped by her blindness – instead, her movements around the countryside are unrestrained, and so are her emotions.

Lucilla instigates and controls her relationship with Oscar, in a way that is reminiscent of how Rosamond took charge in her relationship with Leonard in *The Dead Secret*. In the earlier novel, the gender roles are reversed because the man is disabled; in *Poor Miss Finch*, the gender roles are subverted thanks to opportunities offered by the woman’s disability.

A satire of religious responses to disability.

The non-sexual natures and the passivity of blind heroines are not the only sentimental facets of representations of the blind rejected by Collins in *Poor Miss Finch*. Collins also takes a swipe at some of the ‘Christian’ attitudes that were expressed toward disability, particularly those that called upon the disabled to accept their disability as part of God’s will. These attitudes stressed religiously-based resignation toward disability, or even

¹²³ Collins’s novel *Basil* features a scene in which the novel’s ‘heroine’ Margaret attempts to kill a cat that has killed the canary that Margaret keeps in a cage (Collins, *Basil*, 133-4). The bird imagery in *Poor Miss Finch*, and perhaps in *Basil*, seems intended to symbolise the idea that women are not free: they are first kept by their fathers, then by their husbands.

seeing disability as a blessing from God. Such attitudes were often adopted and expressed by disabled persons themselves within their letters or memoirs – reflecting the prevalence of religious belief during the period, but also the power of social custom to influence attitudes.

In *Poor Miss Finch* it is Reverend Finch who most often expresses religious platitudes about Lucilla's disability. Although his remarks sound like suitable expressions for a 'pious' person, it is always implied that Reverend Finch's platitudes are designed to dissuade Lucilla from bucking the status quo by seeking any treatment for her blindness. Reverend Finch benefits in some ways from Lucilla's position when she is blind (he is living off some of her money, and perhaps he believes that her regaining her sight would make it more likely that she shall marry). He never actually displays any real desire (Christian or otherwise) to console or help Lucilla. Therefore, his statements do not appear to be examples of wisdom, but instead self-serving, or ultimately, empty.

Of course, many people did seriously advocate a religious acceptance of disability. Martha Stoddard Holmes explains the attraction that such attitudes might have held for the disabled:

Both Scripture and melodrama place disability within a context that not only promises special compensation in the afterlife, but also confers special significance in the here and now. If being an afflicted child meant being under God's special protection ...that concept could be empowering (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 190).

But, as Stoddard Holmes notes, the possible danger of such teaching is that it tells the disabled person to ignore the self and their own feelings, and to see themselves as only "a notion of God's plan". This attitude frames disability as a Christian melodrama and can lead to the effacement of "the subjectivity of the disabled person and the material and historical realities that shape his or her existence". Such religious responses toward disability therefore now seem "inherently at odds with disability activism", and even at odds with more ableist notions "of autonomy and individualism" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 185). The viewpoints expressed by Reverend Finch also seem out of place in *Poor Miss Finch*, because Collins stresses Lucilla's right to express her own autonomy. Reverend Finch suggests that Lucilla should do nothing to regain her sight, because God had a purpose in causing her blindness. A pious or wise person should not disrupt that design. But if Lucilla were to listen to this advice, she would have to ignore or change her desire to receive treatment, and to regard herself as only a pawn in God's hands, not as someone who should exert the power to make her own decisions.

Collins appears to side with a more *secular* viewpoint about the disabled person's subjectivity and their right to decide for themselves about treatment. At the end of *Poor Miss Finch*, Lucilla reverts to accepting her disability, no longer regarding it as something that should be fixed. However, this should not be read as an endorsement of Reverend Finch's views, as Lucilla makes this decision for practical reasons and due to *her own feelings* about her blindness. Blindness is actually the more comfortable condition for her; she finds that she is, in general, more sensorially aware when she is blind, and more in tune with her environment. She can also manage her relationship with Oscar more readily when she is blind.

Toward the end of the novel, even though her first surgery was not properly successful, Lucilla knows that further surgery still holds some chance of permanently restoring her sight. Despite this, she chooses not to undergo more surgery. Lucilla is therefore blind at the end of the novel, but this is partly according to her own desires. She never displays any religious resignation toward having a disability, nor is there any suggestion that her disability sanctifies her. By avoiding such religious statements or sanctification of disability, Collins refuses the traditional approach of having Lucilla function merely as an "emotional catalyst" for others, and avoids sentimentalizing Lucilla or her disability. He also counteracts the ideas that Lucilla's blindness is either a 'curse' that must be fixed, or a 'blessing' from God. His way of considering this issue therefore prefigures the messages favoured by twentieth- and twenty-first century disability activism and scholarship.¹²⁴

In *Poor Miss Finch* Collins also seems to parody stereotypically sentimental responses to disability, by using irony in the title of the novel. "The word 'Poor' is habitually appended to 'blind woman' in both fictional and nonfictional texts" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 84), but Collins's novel makes it clear that this is not how the reader should think of Lucilla. Madame Pratolungo expects Lucilla to be melancholy and poetic, but soon realises that she is neither dependent nor sad. Lucilla has her own income that she uses to aid her family, she is known to everyone in the village, and she walks around her environs independently. Significantly, she "is only victimized when she regains her sight" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 85).

¹²⁴ This critical stance toward religion that appears in the portrait of Reverend Finch is reminiscent of the anti-clerical or anti-religious stance that Collins adopts in *Hide and Seek*, although Reverend Finch is obviously a more comic character than is *Hide and Seek*'s Mr. Thorpe.

Oscar's epilepsy and non-normative appearance.

Not satisfied with only depicting various effects of blindness, in *Poor Miss Finch* Wilkie Collins also attempts to realistically depict an epileptic character. This constitutes another act of characterization by which Collins makes less alien those figures whom literature had traditionally othered or marginalized.

Collins's decision to depict epilepsy also seems ironic, given that in 1866, Thomas Arnold the younger referred to sensation fiction as the "convulsional school" of fiction (Arnold, "Recent Novel Writing"; qtd. in Radford, 22), and that the alienist Henry Maudsley conceived of the sensation novel as an "epileptic" novel genre that was "'an achievement of the epileptic imagination'" (Maudsley, *Responsibility in Mental Disease*, 243, qtd. in Bauman, "Epilepsy, Crime, and Masculinity", endnote 14). In *Poor Miss Finch* the sobriquet of the "convulsional school" can be taken literally. Oscar Dubourg has epileptic fits and these fits are treated by his taking doses of a medicine that turns his skin blue.

While most Victorian critics seem to have generally found Collins's representation of blindness acceptable, the representation of Oscar's disability was subject to derision from them, largely because of Oscar's blue face. Soon after the novel's publication, one reviewer asked: "what is the aim of this story? That the blind should marry the dark-blue?" (Unsigned review, *Nation*, 7 March 1872, xiv, 158-59; qtd. in Page, 199).

However, an examination of the scientific context behind Collins's depiction of Oscar's epilepsy and his subsequent skin discolouration reveals that Collins's portrayal again shows considerable accuracy.¹²⁵ In "Epilepsy and Catalepsy in Anglo-American Literature between Romanticism and Realism: Tennyson, Poe, Eliot and Collins" Peter Wolf¹²⁶ stresses the accuracy of Collins's depiction of Oscar's first serious seizure, stating that Collins

virtually gives us a clinical case study with a matter-of-fact description of a seizure ... the aetiology and therapy are part of the case history ... Whereas with the earlier authors the distinction between epilepsy and catalepsy appears somewhat blurred ... Collins' description of (post-traumatic) epilepsy and a focal seizure is fully correct (Wolf, 292; see *Poor Miss Finch*, 93-94).

¹²⁵ The following website devoted to the representation of epilepsy in literature appreciates the realism of Oscar's grand mal seizure, and the accuracy of the idea that he was treated with nitrate of silver (see <<http://www.epilepsiemuseum.de/alt/lucillaen.html>>).

¹²⁶ Wolf is not a literary critic, but a medical doctor. I am uncertain whether his article was originally written in English, or has been translated from German.

Catherine Peters likewise stresses the accuracy of Collins's depiction of epilepsy (Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, xii-xiii),¹²⁷ while Laurence Talairach-Vielmas provides a detailed medical analysis of Oscar's epilepsy and considers his case in relation to a history of the understanding of epilepsy. Talairach-Vielmas makes educated guesses as to which sources Collins consulted, noting that

the depiction of Oscar's fits matches Hughlings Jackson's conclusions on unilateral epilepsy concerning the location of organic disease in the brain on the opposite side of the head of the body convulsed: Oscar receives a blow on the left side of his head and his body is twisted to the right (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, 104).

It was believed that "Mental or physical shocks" could be a cause of epilepsy (Talairach-Vielmas, *ibid.*, 104),¹²⁸ especially receiving injuries to the brain. Oscar suffers both nervous shock and physical injury when he is attacked by robbers (*Poor Miss Finch*, 81-2). *Poor Miss Finch* appears to suggest that Oscar's head injury is the primary catalyst of Oscar's epilepsy, as the epileptic attacks begin soon after he is hit on the head. The various causes that *Poor Miss Finch* imputes for Oscar's epilepsy all correspond with the findings of contemporaneous epilepsy research.

Oscar's development of epilepsy also carries some symbolic weight as epilepsy was often considered to imply certain things about a person's character. It was considered a disease in which the brain prompted unwanted bodily movements; because this literally signified the sufferer's loss of mental control, it was believed that epilepsy might signal the sufferer's lack of "willpower". Collins does not entirely refute this particular idea, since Oscar is repeatedly described as "weak" (213) "vacillating" (211) and effeminate, and he agrees to deceive Lucilla. His epilepsy may therefore be read as an extreme, symbolic manifestation of his character flaws.

Other connotations attached to epilepsy reached back to the ancient and "spiritual" associations of the condition. Collins's depiction of Oscar seems to reveal some of the superstitions that were cast upon physiological disorders, while also relating to theories of degeneration:

the description of the fit capitalizes on the ambivalent construction of the disease, halfway between supernatural and medical interpretations: the

¹²⁷ Peters contrasts Collins's representation of epilepsy with its more melodramatic representation in Charles Reade's *A Terrible Temptation* (1871). Reade's epileptic foams at the mouth (see Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, xiii).

¹²⁸ At this point Talairach-Vielmas repeats information gained from Henry Maudsley, *Body and Mind: An Inquiry Into Their Connection and Mutual Influence* (1871 edition), 38.

writhing creature looks subjected to a higher power, as the giant hands suggest, *while Oscar's fall at the doctor's feet may, perhaps, symbolize man's regression and his fall down the evolutionary scale* (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, 104; emphasis added).

For the Victorians another implication of Oscar's development of epilepsy would have been a likelihood that he might eventually become insane. While this belief now seems erroneous, Henry Maudsley believed that "the degenerative changes" instigated by head injuries to could "lead to mental derangement" and cause the sufferer to become suspicious, deluded, "insane and violent" (Talairach-Vielmas, *ibid.*, 105).¹²⁹ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas believes that such ideas are hinted at when Oscar becomes increasingly nervous and grumpy after he is attacked (see Talairach-Vielmas, *ibid.*, 105-6), and that these plot details make Oscar begin to appear sinister. It is certainly possible to make connections between Oscar's development of epilepsy, his change of colour, and the flaws in his character, but I would not go so far as to read Oscar as the "villain" of the novel (see Talairach-Vielmas, *ibid.*, 105-7).

Of considerable interest is the fact that *Poor Miss Finch*, while showing no concern about the heredity of blindness, *does* voice concern that Oscar's epilepsy could be transmitted to his children. This inconsistency may reflect that epilepsy was not so well understood as blindness was, or that epilepsy was considered a much more frightening disability. It may reflect society's fear of epilepsy-related madness (Talairach-Vielmas, *ibid.*, 95), or that it was generally accepted that "inheritance" was the cause of epilepsy in about thirty per cent of the cases (Talairach-Vielmas, *ibid.*, 104). In the light of this knowledge, Oscar's desire to rid himself of his epilepsy may not only be linked to his fear that Lucilla would reject a "blue man" but also linked to the knowledge that epilepsy had a high rate of transmission to offspring – although it is unclear whether his treating his epilepsy would lower the likelihood of transmission.

However, Collins quells any nagging fears that readers might have had about whether Oscar could become violent or insane. Despite being a "weak" character, he remains psychologically stable and it appears that he is a loving husband. Meanwhile, Lucilla learns not to mind the blue tint of Oscar's skin. While Madame Pratolungo refers to another epileptic man who has been treated with silver nitrate, as looking "devilish", she nevertheless realises that the man in question has a happy family life (*Poor Miss Finch*,

¹²⁹ Talairach-Vielmas refers to Henry Maudsley's *The Pathology of Mind*. New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1867 and 1880, pages 226 and 227.

105).¹³⁰ In like fashion, *Poor Miss Finch* eventually minimizes the pathological interpretations attached to Oscar's appearance; he is never portrayed according to stereotypes of the epileptic insane. Once more, this seems to be in line with Collins's frequent attempts to debunk myths about disability. Even though his epilepsy may signify some of his character flaws, the major impression the reader receives of Oscar is that he is the victim of an unpleasant condition. However, both his moral weakness and his epilepsy are treatable.

I have also mentioned that Oscar's blue skin discolouration has been the target of critical mocking both during the Victorian period and more recently. However, Collins is once more accurate in this suggestion, because during the Victorian period there was indeed a real-life "cure" for epilepsy that caused the patient's skin to turn blue. It had been fairly common practice to dose epilepsy sufferers with nitrate of silver, although it was considered an outdated and controversial treatment by the time Collins wrote *Poor Miss Finch*. Nitrate of silver was known to cause other physical problems, such as "perforated stomachs", as well as skin colouration (see Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine*, 102; Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, xii; and Wolf, "Epilepsy and Catalepsy", 292).

Now that the scientific accuracy of this detail has been accepted by some critics, there has been a new tendency in criticism of *Poor Miss Finch* to read Oscar's skin discolouration and his worry about Lucilla's response to it as a commentary upon racism. Lillian Nayder has been the leading proponent of this theory. Some of Collins's other novels, such as *The Moonstone* and *Armadale*, contain narratives that seem to argue against racism and negative colonialist attitudes. Perhaps because of this tendency in Collins's work, it has been noted that *Poor Miss Finch* may use Oscar's blue colouring to posit parallels between "the medical patient and the racial other", who are both created by forms of "British progress" (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine*, 106, 107).

Lillian Nayder has suggested that Oscar's blue skin becomes the focus for an allegory about Victorian attitudes toward intermarriage between white people and dark-skinned people:

¹³⁰ Talairach-Vielmas nevertheless reads Oscar as quite threatening, as a form of "modern Gothic villain", and suggests that Lucilla's marriage to him is a "forced marriage". This reading seems unusual: Lucilla is always willing to marry Oscar; the only problem is that she does not know about his skin discolouration. However, Talairach-Vielmas is right to suggest that Oscar's nickname, "Bluebeard", has sinister connotations, and Madame Pratolungo does state that when Oscar is angry, "Some lurking devil in him ... leapt up and looked at me out of his eyes" (*Poor Miss Finch*, 213, qtd. in Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine*, 106).

Treating Oscar's change in pigmentation as if it were a transformation in race, Collins considers the ways in which racial identity is socially constructed in Victorian culture while also suggesting that racial difference is a disfigurement of sorts. Uniting his dark-blue hero with a blind, white heroine who must overcome her irrational aversion to dark-skinned people in order to marry the man she loves, Collins calls attention to the blindness of racial prejudice (Nayder, "'Blue Like Me': Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, and the Construction of Racial Identity", 267).

Some suggestions made by Nayder appear debatable: for example, she suggests that most Victorians would have been unwilling to contemplate a marriage between a white skinned woman and a man with dark skin. She also points out that the novel is set in 1858, "the second year of the Indian mutiny" (Nayder, "'Blue Like Me'", 270) and suggests that Lucilla's fear of dark colours could be inspired by reports about the mutiny, or by novels in which Hindu and Muslim men were described negatively (Nayder, *ibid.*, 272-3). This is interesting, but Collins's text does not offer any solid basis for the latter two suppositions, and the novel provides a different psychological explanation for Lucilla's hatred of dark colours, explaining it as a misapprehension prompted by her blindness, and in fact a "common antipathy" among the blind (*Poor Miss Finch*, 223). Lucilla's blindness has exerted a moral or psychological effect; it is not necessary for the reader to surmise extra-textual reasons for Lucilla's fear of dark-skinned men.

However, Nayder does identify a valid symbolic correlation between blindness and racism within *Poor Miss Finch*, with the suggestion that Lucilla must become "blind" to Oscar's differing pigmentation. A correlation is made between the "otherness" attached to Oscar's blue skin, and the "othering" directed toward non-white people. Lucilla reacts with unreasonable fear to a Hindu gentleman, imagining a horde of "brown demons" around him (118) and Oscar is taunted for being a "Blue Man" (129). Lucilla learns to overcome her intolerance of dark colours; this could certainly mean that the novel not only suggests the possibility of refusing to be dissuaded by a partner's disability, but that it also, less overtly, conveys the message that it is possible to overcome racial prejudice. Rather than blatantly saying that racism is wrong or misguided, the narrative embeds such an idea within its exploration of the psychological effects of Lucilla's blindness. The narrative focuses on Lucilla's *misperception* and overactive imagination, as part of an examination of the difference between what a blind person *imagines* objects and people to look like, and what they look like *in reality*.¹³¹ In this way, Collins explores the issue

¹³¹ Lillian Nayder believes that a young woman reacting to a Hindu man with horror would have been considered a normal response at the time, but that "By identifying this reaction as 'unreasonable in the last

of how physical blindness may (or may not) lead to unusual psychological effects. While I believe Collins's primary objective with *Poor Miss Finch* is to examine the psychology of the blind, the novel nevertheless suggests that racism is a form of pathology. Like Lucilla's unwarranted fear of dark colours, racist ideas are based on misperception, out of control imaginations, and irrationality. Lucilla imagines the Hindu man to be devilish, but in reality, he is *not so*. To this degree, Lucilla's *real* "blindness" is "her color prejudice" (Nayder, "'Blue Like Me'", 270).¹³²

Since the details of Oscar's epilepsy and his discolouration are actually medically accurate, and are used to question assumptions about epilepsy and to criticise racial prejudice, Collins can easily be defended against any suggestion that Oscar's 'blueness' is ridiculous, an artistic flaw, or only used for sensational effect. According to Lillian Nayder, this use of symbolism in *Poor Miss Finch* is part of its link to "reformist" fiction (see Nayder, "'Blue Like Me'", 278-279). This may be a valid point, since we have already seen that in *The Dead Secret* Collins argues against class discrimination and discrimination against fallen women and illegitimate children.

Respect for the rights of the blind.

Collins uses his two main characters, Lucilla and Oscar, to raise and answer questions related to vision, social insight, psychological processes and issues of perception, and to quietly argue against racial prejudice. As Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has noted, blindness and epilepsy are both disabilities that involve "a lack of volitional control over the body or over thought processes" (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine*, 95), so Collins may also have been attempting to normalize these conditions or to assuage public fears about them caused by the way that they epitomized "lack of control".

Poor Miss Finch also poses practical questions about how others should treat the blind. Throughout much of the novel, Oscar and Nugent, aided by Madame Pratolungo and Herr Grosse, deceive Lucilla about Oscar's skin discolouration. The questions that are raised via this deception are whether or not deceiving Lucilla is justifiable, and whether or not Lucilla has a right to know the truth. In an especially well-argued article, "Spectacular

degree' and as a 'horror peculiar to the blind'" (on pages 118 and 226 of *Poor Miss Finch*) (273-274), Collins "pathologizes the racist norm" (Nayder, "'Blue Like Me'", 273-4). However, Lucilla's antipathy toward dark-skinned people is not considered normal by the other characters in the novel, but in fact considered highly unreasonable. Of course, perhaps this merely suggests Collins's attitude, not the level of racial prejudice present in Victorian society.

¹³² Nayder mentions another possible reading: by making Oscar appear blue, Collins "blurs the distinction between 'white' and 'black' and reveals that racial boundaries are not fixed" (Nayder, "'Blue Like Me'", 268).

Deceptions: Closets, Secrets, and Identity in Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch*", Samuel Lyndon Gladden uses theories posited in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* to provide an illuminating discussion of how and why Oscar tries to hide the fact that his face is blue. Oscar tries to present himself to Lucilla as a 'normal', pale-skinned man (Gladden, 470), while those with access to the truth about Oscar's secret 'blueness' hide this knowledge from Lucilla (Gladden, 468, 470).

The novel asks us: does a man's non-normative – or even bizarre – appearance matter if the woman involved with him is blind? Does a blind woman have a right to know about any change of appearance in her suitor? If Lucilla is happy not knowing about Oscar's skin colour, is it the kindest option not to tell her? Moreover, although Oscar, Nugent, and Madame Pratolungo ostensibly wish Lucilla to recover her sight, by lying to her they prevent her from "seeing clearly". Even once she can see, they contrive to keep her (metaphorically) "in the dark". While she is still blind, on two occasions Lucilla passionately asks other characters not to deceive her or take advantage of her blindness (94-95, 180). Therefore other characters' deceptions of Lucilla come across as especially selfish and as a violation of Lucilla's rights.¹³³ Via this kind of protest from Lucilla, and occasional commentary from Madame Pratolungo, *Poor Miss Finch* is quite explicit in its support of Lucilla's right to know the truth about Oscar's appearance.

Criticism of the medical profession.

In *Hide and Seek* Wilkie Collins suggests that it is perfectly acceptable for Madonna, the novel's heroine, to remain mute. He also depicts various doctors as unable to restore Madonna's hearing. In *The Dead Secret* Collins depicts Victorian doctors as unable to prevent Leonard's decline into blindness. While he was certainly interested in the latest scientific findings, Collins's fiction nevertheless often depicts Victorian doctors as lacking the capability to prevent or cure sensory disabilities. By pointing out that Victorian medicine does not yet have all of the answers, Collins appears to criticize the over-estimation some doctors have of their abilities, and the strength of Victorian society's belief in the figure of the doctor. However, this approach to depicting those doctors who attempt to cure disabilities also seems to contribute to Collins's message that disabilities can be happily lived with by disabled people if they are accepted by

¹³³ By limiting Lucilla's access to knowledge, the other characters compound her disability and limit her agency. She is made more feminine and less powerful as the able-bodied characters assert their power.

society and not continually pushed toward seeking treatment. The repeated failure of medical treatments is part of Collins's resistance of such treatments.

Samuel Lyndon Gladden notes how *Poor Miss Finch* originally attributes a great deal of power to the oculist Herr Grosse. Grosse is originally presented as having all the answers when it comes to curing Lucilla's blindness (Gladden, 481-82). Yet, his authority is gradually undermined, and the surgery he carries out is ultimately ineffective.

As mentioned earlier in this section, it appears that the operation carried out by Herr Grosse is 'couching' for cataracts, a rather old-fashioned form of treatment. 'Couching' involved making an incision in the lens of the eye, and then either pushing the entire cataract toward the back of the eye (so that it would not interfere with the field of vision), or cutting the cataract into pieces and dispersing each piece toward the back or side of the eye ('depressing' the cataract). Couching allowed the possibility that the cataract would move back to the front of the eye, or grow back since pieces of cataract remained in the eye. This method of operating on cataracts was still being widely used during the mid to late nineteenth-century, but it was an operation that had existed since ancient times, without many advances in technique or effectiveness. An alternative operation, extracting the cataract completely, had been developed by the time *Poor Miss Finch* was published, but was not common until later in the century.¹³⁴

Nugent refers to Herr Grosse as the foremost expert in his field, yet the details given about Lucilla's operation and the failure of the operation suggest that Herr Grosse uses the older technique. Herr Grosse only refers to the need to cut into the cataract (200); he does not refer to extracting it. While Herr Grosse originally appears to be the cleverer and more progressive of the two oculists, his optimism is misplaced. Dr. Sebright emerges as the more astute surgeon since he is aware that the methods known to him could not cure Lucilla's cataracts (199).

Tabitha Sparks has also noticed *Poor Miss Finch*'s veiled criticism of the medical profession, and identifies disturbing undertones, both political and sexual, in the novel's descriptions of Herr Grosse. The novel's descriptions of Herr Grosse's surgical procedures emphasize invasion and penetration, and his foreign credentials mean that the surgery he performs could be read symbolically as a foreign invader infiltrating an English body (Sparks, "Surgical Injury and Narrative Cure", 3). Meanwhile, Herr Grosse also exerts an unusual degree of influence over his patient, and Lucilla's operation is

¹³⁴ This information was found on the following websites: "History of Ophthalmology", <<http://www.mrcophth.com/Historyofophthalmology/cataracthistory.htm>>, and "Cataract Surgery", <http://www.eyeweb.org/cataract_surgery.htm>.

described almost as though it is a form of “deflowering”. For example, Herr Grosse’s surgical instruments are associated with penetrative force and pain (Sparks, 7). Sparks’s commentary upon the sexual undertones of Lucilla’s eye surgery and Grosse’s behaviour makes sense, and in fact, further examples of dubious behaviour on Herr Grosse’s part can be found, as he tells Lucilla to let him “have his way” with her (*Poor Miss Finch*, 201), and asks her for kisses (195). His sensuality is demonstrated by his huge appetite (191, 197, 205). These connotations undermine Herr Grosse’s superficially cuddly and amiable appearance.

Sparks’s conclusion is that *Poor Miss Finch* holds troubling connotations for those who support corrective surgery: the failure of the surgery “disputes medicine’s putative power to cure”. Perhaps even more troubling is that when Lucilla can see, her life does not become any happier than before, even during the time that she believes her surgery to have been permanently successful (Sparks, 4). Sparks suggests that Lucilla’s cataract surgery can even be read as a “destructive” force, because it is only after Lucilla’s surgery that her relationship with Oscar begins to fall apart (Sparks, 2).¹³⁵ Because of the failure of the surgery, and the disruption it causes to the novel’s love plot, Sparks suggests that *Poor Miss Finch* depicts the problems that may result from meddling with nature (Sparks, 5). In general, she appears to conclude that *Poor Miss Finch* is a rather conservative book, interpreting its events as suggesting that Collins wishes to turn a “blind eye” to “political and medical changes” (Sparks, 13).¹³⁶

This may be a possible reading, but I believe that Collins’s rationale with *Poor Miss Finch* is similar to that employed in *Hide and Seek*. Rather than making a sweeping rejection of new or old forms of surgery, Collins uses *Poor Miss Finch* to repeat *Hide and Seek*’s argument that disabilities do not need to be “fixed”. While Collins is not engaging with controversies over the treatment of a disability to the same degree as he was in *Hide and Seek* (in which he appears to argue against the cause of “oralism”), he does repeat the same message present in *Hide and Seek*, that a disabled person may learn to live happily with a disability, not viewing it as a deprivation, or that a disability may be accompanied by its own sociological or physiological advantages or “consolations”.

¹³⁵ I believe this last point is debatable, as it seems that Oscar’s lying is as much the destructive force here as the eye surgery is, and he begins to lie to her even when she is still blind. However, it is true that Lucilla is happier before the surgery.

¹³⁶ Tabitha Sparks’s article actually discusses *Poor Miss Finch* in conjunction with Collins’s *Heart and Science*. She finds many correlations between the two, since both novels feature surgery and ‘sinister’ surgeons.

***Poor Miss Finch's* similarities to a contemporaneous real-life biography of a blind person.**

Previous criticism of *Poor Miss Finch* has failed to reap all of the rewards that can be gained by reading the novel in conjunction with contemporary non-fiction writings that discuss people's personal experiences of blindness and the public perception of blindness. One useful source of Victorian commentary about blindness is found in tract 44 of *Volume III* of the popular Victorian periodical *Chambers's Miscellany*,¹³⁷ titled "Anecdotes of the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind".¹³⁸ This tract, or another version of one story within, may have been a source for *Poor Miss Finch*. Part of this tract in *Chambers Miscellany* recounts the life and experiences of a deaf, dumb and blind man, James Mitchell, and by reading the tract in tandem with *Poor Miss Finch* we can gain further information about the ways in which Collins responds to some common paradigms about blindness and how his representation of Lucilla departs from what seem to have been common means of representation.

Perusal of this tract suggests that the attitudes toward blindness expressed in *Poor Miss Finch* bear similarity to some of the thoughts about blindness expressed in contemporaneous non-fiction writings. The introductory section of the *Chambers Miscellany* text appears to have been written by a journalist and to be aimed at a broad middle-class audience, but as the tract continues, the writer incorporates information obtained from scientists or from first-hand witnesses of the lives of the deaf, dumb, and blind. While I am unsure that Wilkie Collins read this specific tract, the tract shows great similarity to an account of James Mitchell's life that appeared in John Kitto's *The Lost Senses: Deafness and Blindness*, which is a work that Collins certainly read. Meanwhile, some of the social attitudes toward blindness expressed in this tract are remarkably similar to some that appear in *Poor Miss Finch*. The tract also contains a description of an operation to remove cataracts that appears very similar to the operation Lucilla endures.

The tract in *Chambers Miscellany* discusses various people who have lived successful or admirable lives, despite their disability; it charts the challenges faced by these people and the skills they learnt. The first person whose story is mentioned is James Mitchell, a

¹³⁷ *Chambers's Miscellany* was a family magazine that appeared in the 1840s, 50s, 60s and early 70s. Various web sources show that it was published in book form during (at least) the years 1845 to c. 1870.

¹³⁸ Found in *Chambers's Miscellany of Instructive and Entertaining Tracts: New and Revised Edition, Vol III* (London and Edinburgh: W. And R. Chambers; undated, but probably c. 1869-1871). The miscellany is without consecutive pagination; at the beginning of each tract the numbering begins again. Volume III of the Miscellany was first published in 1845, and again in 1854, but the edition that I have used appears to date to around 1870/71.

man who was born in 1795 in Scotland. His story shares many parallels with *Poor Miss Finch*. Like Lucilla Finch, James Mitchell was born with a cataract over each retina. However, it was eventually discovered that in addition to his blindness, he was deaf. As with Collins's Lucilla, not *all* of Mitchell's eyesight was gone – he was able to detect various levels of brightness (tract, p. 3).¹³⁹ The lens of Mitchell's right eye was covered by a cataract, but the eye's pupil still contracted when exposed to light, while his left eye did not register as much light (p. 4). Similarly to Collins's heroine, Mitchell revels in the use of the other senses that he possesses – he is addicted to sensual feeling via touch, vibration and light; his main interest is “gratifying his other senses” (p. 3).

At age fifteen James Mitchell undergoes an eye operation in order to remove the cataracts and restore normal vision. As in the case of Lucilla Finch, this involves visiting more than one eye specialist: Mitchell's case was initially dealt with (unsuccessfully) by the famous eye surgeon Astley Cooper, and later by another doctor, “Mr Wardrop” (p. 3). The operation conducted by Mr Wardrop is described as “couching for cataract” (p. 9). Just as in Collins's novel, Mitchell's eye operation is originally successful. However, after only a few weeks, his sight begins to fail; the cataracts grow back. Either Wardrop lacked the skill to remove the cataracts permanently, or Mitchell's case was too complex to operate on successfully (pp. 9, 11).

Chambers's Miscellany describes the operation and its aftermath in some detail: Mr Wardrop manages to partially “break up the cataract”, giving Mitchell “a certain degree of vision”. Mitchell's ability to see changes his countenance entirely (p. 8). The anonymous writer documents how Mitchell gradually trains his eyes to see an increasing number of objects, starting with “a shilling on a table” (p. 9-10). Like Lucilla, Mitchell is most “pleased with objects which were of a white, and still more particularly those of a red colour” (p. 11) (see *Poor Miss Finch*, 227 and other pages).

Throughout *Poor Miss Finch* we are given the impression that docility, humility, purity and saintliness are expected of Lucilla as a blind woman. Yet Lucilla does not live up to this expectation. Mitchell, apparently, does, being “very docile and obedient to his father and sister” (p. 7). He submits to the pre-operation examination of his eyes “with fortitude and complete resignation, as if he was persuaded that he had ... an imperfection to be remedied by the assistance of his fellow-creatures”. Mitchell seems to trust his family, who wish for the operation to go ahead (p. 7). He also trusts that the surgeons can

¹³⁹ In *Poor Miss Finch* Herr Grosse discovers that Lucilla can sometimes discern between light and dark objects or light sources. Because of this fact (which indicates that cataracts are a major factor in Lucilla's blindness), Herr Grosse encourages Lucilla that her blindness is not incurable (195).

succeed. According to *Chambers's Miscellany*, it was only during the actual operation that Mitchell expressed any discomfort, having to be kept still in a special chair (p. 9).¹⁴⁰ Yet, after the operation, Mitchell is happy and docile again (p. 11). The article is concerned with presenting Mitchell as a harmless fellow of good character, at every stage of his life, whether he is with or without his sight. However, at this point, it suggests that he is especially patient.

After Mitchell loses his sight once more, he is still described as being “so perfectly inoffensive, that all classes contribute towards his safety and even to his amusement” (p. 13). He is described as having an intelligent and “good” countenance (p. 15), and a gentleman visiting Mitchell in 1832 (when Mitchell is blind once more) describes Mitchell as being very neat about his dress, perhaps with the intention of stressing Mitchell’s sanity and respectability (p. 15).

However, the narrator’s need to describe some of the challenges faced by Mitchell leads to potential narrative conflicts. By stressing Mitchell’s difficulties, the narrator must admit that Mitchell is not completely independent, and mention Mitchell’s occasional outbursts of anger and frustration. Because he is both blind and deaf, when Mitchell is a child he cannot be easily taught new information or given direction: “Excluded from all ordinary means of direction, the child was guided only by feeling and natural impulse – an *object* so *helpless* as to require *constant and careful attention*” (p. 2; emphasis added). While this description of Mitchell’s life may be accurate, it nevertheless emphasises the degree to which he is a “helpless” “object”, difficult to teach or control, and a burden on his family. The narrator also reveals that the adult Mitchell did sometimes suffer from others’ misreading of him and from the stigma of disability: when Mitchell became blind again later in life, neighbours occasionally mistook him for a drunk or insane person because of his crooked gait, and shut their doors on him (p. 15).

The narrative also creates a pathetic scene when Mitchell’s operation fails:

This short gleam of hope and sunshine soon closed upon poor Mitchell. Couching for cataract is seldom permanently successful. The cloudy petal-like matter being for the most part only broken up, not altogether removed, again settles into a mass, and blindness once more ensues. Such was the case with the object of our memoir; his eye again became opaque, and he relapsed into a state of, as it was thought, irremediable blindness. The brief and partial view which he thus got of the world around him was all that he was destined to see of the face of nature (p. 11).

¹⁴⁰ At this point in time, cataract surgery was carried out without anaesthesia.

Mitchell is left with only recollections “to cheer his future life of loneliness”, as he is “plunged” into “as great a state of darkness as before” (p. 11).

Therefore, while *Poor Miss Finch* argues that Lucilla is happier when blind, the *Chambers’s Miscellany* tract suggests that it would be terrible to lose one’s sight. When Mitchell becomes blind once more, he is presumed to be even sadder than when he was blind the first time, because he has had a glimpse of the world around him, only to have his sight taken away. The tract’s reference to “Poor Mitchell” brings to mind the epithet that is appended to Lucilla’s name, but here it is used without irony. The negative emotional response supposedly felt by Mitchell at the second loss of his sight is in stark contrast to the response felt by Lucilla Finch when a similar catastrophe befalls her. Lucilla is relieved when she goes blind once more, as she is glad not to have to deal with the issues that appeared when she was sighted. *Poor Miss Finch* and “Anecdotes of the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind” therefore seem to provide two opposing views regarding the pathos of blindness.

The *Chambers’s Miscellany* tract does attempt to deal with what were very common philosophical questions about how the blind, the deaf, and the deaf and blind can acquire any knowledge and learning, and how particular disabilities limit or affect other abilities. The tract begins with a paragraph lamenting the unfortunate condition of people living with a disability (p. 2), and stresses that despite the knowledge that

A deprivation of one or more of the senses ... ordinarily leads to increased activity of the others, in consequence of the greater reliance placed on them; nevertheless it seems evident that any such deprivation must, less or more, cause a deficiency in the intellectual conceptions. A person who has been blind from earliest infancy can, by no process of feeling, hearing, or smelling, be made to have even moderately correct ideas of light or dark colours (p. 1).

The question is posed (and left unanswered) whether the lack of one sense necessarily means the afflicted person is less ‘intelligent’ than the typical able-bodied person. The first page of the tract assumes that when the disabled person lacks or loses a sensory ability, it follows that they must also forgo many or all of the experiences that would typically be gained through that sensory ability. Someone experiencing a sensory disability must be deprived of particular forms of knowledge and would find it hard to acquire such knowledge in another way. The degree to which sensory disability may limit experience or intelligence is unclear from the tract, since in the discussions of James Mitchell, the narrator describes the ingenious ways in which Mitchell acquires knowledge and expresses himself.

Before the operation to restore his sight, Mitchell gains an impression of sound and music by feeling vibrations in his mouth: he learns how to strike a key against his teeth (pp. 4-5). Mitchell uses his teeth “as organs of touch” (p. 4), and he learns to identify relations and friends by smelling them (p. 5). It is of psychological interest that after his initially successful operation, Mitchell still relies heavily on touch to acquire information: he “seemed to trust little to the information given by the eye, and always turned away his head while he carefully examined by his sense of touch the whole surfaces of bodies presented to him” (p. 9); like Lucilla, Mitchell is presented as preferring some of his old methods of perception, and as taking some time to adjust to his new sight.

However, because the writer of the tract assumes that the lack of one or more senses must slow down Mitchell’s acquisition of knowledge, they are surprised to hear “how much knowledge he had obtained” (p. 6). As explained in my chapter on *Hide and Seek*, it was often believed that the deaf were unintelligent because they lacked oral language. However, the writer of the tract states that there are no such “defects in the powers of his mind as might be suspected” (p. 5). It is recognized that Mitchell is very intelligent, a conclusion that would seem to express quite a positive view of Mitchell’s situation. Nevertheless, the tract includes an anecdote that detracts a little from this message. The anecdote, told by a man who met Mitchell after Mitchell had gone blind again, concludes with a sense of waste: “I could not help thinking how different might have been my interview with this same person had it pleased God to have endowed him with the use of all his senses” (pp. 15-16).

There are also a few other ways in which *The Chambers’s Miscellany* tract expresses attitudes toward disability that are quite different from those expressed in *Poor Miss Finch*. For example, the tract opens with the idea that the disabled must rely on the compensatory solace gained from religion and a belief in Providence: believing in such “provides us a measure of compensatory happiness” (p. 2). *Poor Miss Finch*, although suggesting that Lucilla *can* locate some forms of compensatory happiness in her blindness, certainly never attributes these to any providential source or religious belief. The *Chambers’s Miscellany* tract also makes long-suffering martyrs of Mitchell’s family, stressing how difficult and time-consuming it was for them to look after Mitchell for many years. It especially stresses the “ingenuity” of Mitchell’s sister in devising various systems for teaching Mitchell to communicate with others (p. 16). The tract therefore places the sister in a position of power over Mitchell, and suggests that by helping him

with communication and learning, she has saved Mitchell from becoming a victim of his bad temper.

Lastly, the tract explicitly states that once Mitchell goes blind again, after a brief period of recovered sight, he ceases to be a person of interest.

Numerous particulars are related of the subsequent life of Mitchell, but these it is unnecessary to repeat ... as interest in his conduct and habits in a great degree ceases from the time he obtained a view of the external world (p. 12).

The narrator is interested only in the processes by which the blind collect information while blind, or in the ways they adjust to becoming sighted. Once Mitchell is blind again, after having had the experience of seeing, he no longer seems “special” to the narrator, since it must now be considerably easier for Mitchell to understand the world around him. This is in great contrast with *Poor Miss Finch*, which does not lose interest in Lucilla after she becomes blind again and does not suggest that blindness makes her descend into a life of misery and loneliness. Instead, the text ends with Lucilla happily marrying, and having children.

A comparison of the narrative and language of the *Chambers’ Miscellany* article with those of *Poor Miss Finch* reveals what seems to be a common vocabulary for speaking about the situation of the blind. Mitchell is described as “poor” Mitchell, and both texts present the idea that blindness may be something that “Providence” has chosen to afflict on the subject (although *Poor Miss Finch* appears to do so ironically). Both texts show or suggest that any attempted cure of the disability may be unsuccessful, leaving the subject frustrated and in no better condition than before. It appears, from reading both texts, that the blind were expected to trust Providence to give them the strength to cope with their blindness, and that acquaintances or observers of the blind person felt more comfortable if they were able to describe them as being docile, patient and affectionate. It seems to have been considered a serious moral fault if the disabled person became annoyed by their blindness, impatient with other people, or if they questioned God’s purpose regarding their blindness.

Both the *Chambers’s Miscellany* text and *Poor Miss Finch* imply that the natural tendency of the blind person may be toward feistiness and outbreaks of bad temper. Although the author of the *Chambers Miscellany* tract seems to understand the reasons behind Mitchell’s frustration, he still stresses how much help Mitchell needs from others and that Mitchell’s sister constantly has to devise ways to help him dissipate his frustration. In contrast, while Lucilla appears feisty and sometimes annoyed in *Poor Miss*

Finch, her feistiness and independence are celebrated, and her outbursts of temper are only prompted by deceptions practiced by the sighted. *Poor Miss Finch* also resists the idea that anyone should rule over or manage Lucilla. Nor does it suggest that her blindness causes suffering for her family. Admittedly, Mitchell's situation is more difficult than Lucilla's, since he is deaf as well as blind, but the differences between the texts are instructive: Collins's representation of blindness avoids presenting it as pathetic or as causing extreme dependency.

While it is uncertain that Wilkie Collins ever read the tract in *Chambers's Miscellany*, it is highly likely that he was familiar with at least one form of Mitchell's biography since he had utilised John Kitto's *The Lost Senses* when he wrote *Hide and Seek*. *The Lost Senses* not only contains a section detailing Kitto's experience of deafness, but also contains a long section titled "Blindness" (in effect, 'Book II'). Within the section called "Blindness", Kitto considers the "Comparative Condition of the Blind and the Deaf" and recounts the stories of several disabled people. Amongst these discussions, he tells the story of James Mitchell.

The Lost Senses was published in 1845, at about the same time as *Chambers's Miscellany's* first publication of the Mitchell story.¹⁴¹ Kitto's biography of Mitchell differs slightly from that offered by *Chambers's Miscellany*, but much of the information provided by Kitto appears to have been pulled from the same text that *Chambers's Miscellany* relies on; in general terms, Kitto's version of the story appears to summarize the same text that was the basis for the *Chambers's Miscellany* tract.

Collins's authorial comments about *Poor Miss Finch* do not refer to *The Lost Senses* or to *Chambers's Miscellany*, or indeed, to any other sources he used when writing this novel. However, it seems quite certain that, given the similarities between the experiences of Lucilla and James Mitchell, Collins had knowledge of at least one variant of Mitchell's biography. I would suggest, therefore, that in addition to recognising works by William Cheselden, William Carpenter and John Hughlings Jackson as important scientific sources for *Poor Miss Finch*, we may also recognize the influence of the James Mitchell story upon Collins's depiction of Lucilla.

¹⁴¹ *Chambers's Miscellany* seems to have published a Volume including this tract, first in 1845, again in 1854, and then circa 1870.

Conclusion.

Poor Miss Finch features an unusually high degree of scientific accuracy in the details it provides about eye surgery, the psychology of the blind, and its descriptions of visual processes - or at least a very high level of accuracy considering what was known about vision at the time. This accuracy is largely a result of the close attention Collins paid to details provided by scientific sources such as Cheselden's account of eye surgery (Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, ix, xi). The novel's exploration of how Lucilla's mind and body compensate for her lack of sight, and how she thinks about the world, reflects contemporaneous concerns about how the blind could learn and process knowledge.

Collins's novel is therefore very reflective of his time, but to reproduce such scientific knowledge in fictional form was unusual. Moreover, Collins's approach toward depicting blindness in *Poor Miss Finch* is innovative because he avoids delivering a sentimental or religiously intoned representation of blindness. Instead of following this pattern, he chooses to engage with some of the traditional philosophical and moral questions about blindness, and to infuse his story with an allegory about blindness's symbolic relation to racist beliefs. The novel is unusual in its assertion that a woman with a disability can still be interested in marriage and sexuality, and unusual in its inclusion of scenes that test the ethics of those people who interact with Lucilla. Perhaps even more unusually, although the novel ends with Lucilla losing her eyesight once more, this is presented as being part of her happy ending.

Part of *Poor Miss Finch*'s shedding of old traditions related to the representation of blindness is that Lucilla is not depicted via the paradigm of the blind 'seer'. Instead, her physical/sensory blindness is used to suggest another kind of blindness, as she struggles with prejudices and misperceptions akin to racism. She could perhaps be read as emerging as a kind of 'seer' when she progresses toward accepting Oscar's facial discolouration. Lucilla's disability is also presented as giving her the latitude to engage in abnormally assertive romantic behaviour. Therefore, when Lucilla's blindness returns, it is not a defeat for Lucilla, and it does not seem that it will push her toward the passivity expected of disabled women. If anything, Lucilla may regain the sensory thrill that touching Oscar used to provide, may be more adept at understanding her world and feel more emotionally secure, and may be able to return to her previous subversive behaviour.

It has been noted in criticism that *Poor Miss Finch* is especially radical in its acceptance of Lucilla's sexuality and the possibility of her having children.

Contemporaneous science and cultural opinion usually emphasized that the disabled, deformed or ill should not have children. For example, in 1864 an article in *The Lancet* proclaimed that “People with marked hereditary traits should pause ere they run the risk of transmitting their endowments to a long line of suffering successors”; people with epilepsy and defective vision were both included in the *Lancet*’s list of those forbidden to procreate (“Intermarriage and its Results”, *London Lancet* 1, 69; qtd. in Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 68). But Collins’s novel accepts that both blind people and people with epilepsy may be sexual or enter into marriage.

As well as trying to adapt society’s views of the disabled and fears about hereditary transmission, in *Poor Miss Finch* Collins also begins developing the concept of an ideological link between the subject position of women and the subject position of the disabled. The more assertively Lucilla acts, the less feminine she appears. However, when she acts assertively, she not only escapes gender constraints, but also minimizes the power of her disability to control her life. In *Poor Miss Finch*, the connection between the two positions of disability and femininity remains complicated, since, ironically, it is actually her blindness that sometimes allows Lucilla the leeway to act in transgressive ways, and it is when Lucilla is sighted that she seems most disadvantaged and is most unhappy. It is via such details that Collins turns ableist assumptions on their head.

While *Poor Miss Finch* does not completely demonize eye surgery, it does suggest that Lucilla has a right to decide for herself regarding whether to seek to ‘correct’ her disability. In contrast with Madonna in *Hide and Seek*, Lucilla does at one point decide to try treatment via surgery. However, *Poor Miss Finch* suggests that surgery, even if successful, would not necessarily fix Lucilla’s apparent problems. It also suggests that Lucilla is also a good candidate for marriage, whether blind or not. Meanwhile, the text deals with the fact that Lucilla has developed some strange psychological tendencies as a result of her blindness (such as her hatred of dark colours) by suggesting that *these* are the only things that need to be remedied.

One can observe from the examples above that Collins’s main interest in *Poor Miss Finch* is challenging the paradigms that had traditionally been involved in the representation of the blind, especially in representations of blind women. He rejects the sentimentalized or spiritualized depiction of blindness. Instead his representation of a blind woman is highly reliant on medical and philosophical sources about blindness and eye surgery. Meanwhile, *Poor Miss Finch*’s message that blindness is not necessarily a

terrible affliction and that Lucilla can be happy despite her blindness - perhaps even *because* of her blindness – prefigures some of the findings of modern-day disability scholars. For example, Harlan Lane states that “Workers with blind people view blindness as a devastating personal tragedy although blind people themselves commonly do not” (Lane, “Constructions of Deafness”, 157).

Poor Miss Finch also raises an issue previously dealt with in *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret*: how to show respect for a disabled individual and how to treat them ethically. All three of these novels suggest that it is not acceptable to deceive disabled people or to exclude them from obtaining knowledge that they should have access to: such treatment is condescending and deprives the disabled person of basic rights. Collins avoids making this message seem trite by constructing scenarios that present the issue as a serious and complicated question about equitable human interaction. For example, Oscar has the opportunity to withhold knowledge about his appearance from Lucilla, who is unlikely to discover any deception. As in *The Dead Secret*, hiding the information may help him to retain his lover. Oscar therefore decides to lie to Lucilla. Accordingly, the love plot goes awry, and Madame Pratolungo increasingly refers to Oscar’s behaviour as cowardly. The test for Oscar is not merely whether he is an honest person, but whether he take advantage of Lucilla’s vulnerability and manipulate her for his own happiness, or engage with her on equal terms. Collins’s novel suggests that it is unacceptable to take advantage of someone’s disability. Promoting such a message is an important step toward according disabled people the same level of personhood and agency as the able-bodied.

In addition to seeking to console members of the public who might be blind,¹⁴² *Poor Miss Finch* co-opts scientific information about blindness in order to instruct the able-bodied public, and to lend authority to its portrayal of Lucilla. It also accords the blind equal reproductive rights with the sighted and encourages the able-bodied to act humanely and equitably toward the disabled.

¹⁴² See Collins’s letter to Arthur Locker, dated 18 January 1872. In Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Volume II*, 314-315).

THE LAW AND THE LADY (1875):

I end my investigation of Wilkie Collins's fiction with an examination of *The Law and the Lady* (1875), which contains the most complex representations of mental, physical, and social disability in Collins's oeuvre. The novel contains one of the most astonishing disabled characters in all serious Victorian fiction, the flamboyant Miserrimus Dexter, who is without legs and who manifests various psychological disturbances. *The Law and the Lady* uses Dexter's psychological difficulties and physical disability in order to comment upon contemporary "debates about the relationship between the brain and mind, and between the unconscious and conscious mind" (Pykett, *Wilkie Collins*, 169) and to forward Collins's claim that much of human thought is irrational, rather than reasonable ("Note: Addressed to the Reader", *The Law and the Lady*, 3). *The Law and the Lady* engages with a wide range of Victorian scientific and cultural theories relating to concerns such as evolution and degeneration, psychiatric theories and issues of moral management. It does so most effectively via its focus on the relational dynamics between the main character, Valeria Woodville – a resourceful female detective – and Miserrimus Dexter. Collins develops a strong metaphorical link between his disabled anti-hero and his heroine, via which he presents femininity as a social and legal disability.

Collins's later novels display an increasing tendency to draw attention to social problems and to argue for legal reforms and changes to what Collins perceived as regressive or detrimental social attitudes. The ostensible focus of *The Law and the Lady*'s main plot is a criticism of the Scottish "Not Proven" verdict. In cases of alleged murder, Scottish law courts allowed a verdict that found the defendant neither guilty nor not guilty. *The Law and the Lady* draws attention to the need to reform this aspect of Scottish criminal law.¹⁴³

The Law and the Lady suggests that in Victorian society bodies, both male and female, are sources of great anxiety. When Miserrimus Dexter first appears, his bodily appearance injects many potential sources of anxiety and conflict into the narrative. Dexter is described as having been born without the entire lower half of his body. He has no legs, his body consisting of only a head, arms, and torso, a form of disability now

¹⁴³ Despite the intention behind Collins's novel, the "Not Proven" verdict, used in murder trials, *still exists* in Scotland (see Broadbridge, "The Not Proven Verdict in Scotland" available from the *House of Commons Library*. The citation of the location is: <<https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:bs4mDFwBthgJ:www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN02710.pdf>>. See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/6500541.stm>).

referred to under the umbrella terms of ‘phocomelia’¹⁴⁴ or ‘congenital amputation’.¹⁴⁵ These terms refer to limb deficiencies usually caused by genetic malformations. Such congenital amputations are rare today and must have also been rare in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not known what prompted Collins to depict this particular disability in his fiction, although, since his representation of Dexter engages with theories related to ‘degeneration’, he may have wanted to respond to concerns about cultural decline, or to the perceived dangers when families that carried less desirable physical or mental traits engaged in reproduction.

In addition to his highly visible physical disability, Dexter has psychological difficulties and exhibits extreme, highly changeable behaviour. As a result, Dexter’s representation risks being considered unrealistic or grotesque, or may seem to suggest that Collins uses Dexter for mere melodramatic effect. However, the unusual, even bizarre, imagery and situations in *The Law and the Lady* aim to criticize prevailing beliefs about ‘normality’ and ‘eccentricity’. The novel moves beyond mere exploitation of Dexter, and uses its deliberately contradictory characterisation of him to engage with a variety of nineteenth-century psychological theories and cultural beliefs surrounding physical and mental disability, insanity, and ideas of the normative. Most specifically, Collins engages with theories derived from associationist psychology and with beliefs that underpinned theories of cultural and genetic degeneration.

However, Dexter is not solely used as a symbolic representation of all that is wrong with Victorian society or Victorian science. Collins’s novel also realistically probes Dexter’s experience of physical and mental difficulties, for example, exploring the issue of physical or sensory compensation, by showing that like Madonna and Lucilla in Collins’s earlier fiction, Dexter has adjusted to his physical ‘lack’ by developing a

¹⁴⁴ I became aware of this condition by reading *Life without Limits* by Nick Vujicic. Vujicic was born with ‘tetra-amelia syndrome’, which refers to the absence of all four limbs. It is a version of ‘phocomelia’, which refers to hands or feet being attached to very abbreviated limbs. The condition is caused by the failure of the relevant chromosome to produce the proteins that help limbs to develop. Phocomelia only develops if the ‘defective’ gene causing the condition is inherited from *both* parents (it is a recessive syndrome). If the gene is transmitted by only one parent, the child will merely be a ‘carrier’ of the condition. ‘Phocomelia’ refers to the presence of “seal limbs”, while ‘amelia’ refers to the “complete absence of extremities” (see <<http://www.centrus.com.br/DiplomaFMF/SeriesFMF/18-23-weeks/chapter-09/skeleton.html>>).

¹⁴⁵ See the websites: <www.lifesteps.com/gm/Atuz/ency/congenital_amputation.jsp>, <www.yourdictionary.com/medical/congenital-amputation>, <<http://www.centrus.com.br/DiplomaFMF/SeriesFMF/18-23-weeks/chapter-09/skeleton.html>>, and <<http://www.healthofchildren.com/C/Congenital-Amputation.html>>.

Congenital amputation may occur due to the constriction of the limbs of the foetus while in the womb (for example, the umbilical cord preventing blood flow to a limb), or due to genes not providing the signal to develop a limb. As with phocomelia, such amputations are rare because they usually require that both parents carry a defective gene. In most instances a child merely becomes a carrier of the gene. If congenital amputation does occur, it usually affects only one or two limbs.

compensatory skill. While Dexter's lack of legs causes his general reliance on his wheelchair for movement, he is able to propel himself quickly along the ground on his hands, and possesses enough strength in his hands and upper body to propel himself high into the air (*The Law and the Lady*, 207).

In addition to these physical skills, Dexter has developed a rich but overwrought emotional and mental life which compensates for his loneliness, his lack of emotional outlets, and his lack of social effectiveness. However, the development of Dexter's emotional and imaginative skills contains an element of risk. The novel implies close links between mind and body, so Dexter's *over*-developed imagination and uncontrolled emotions may be read as holding partial responsibility for the psychological and physical decline he undergoes.

Via Dexter's representation, Collins critiques the value we place on the idea of 'normality', while also making a plea for greater sympathy for the disabled. The Victorians considered that the body could tell you a great deal not only about an individual's general health, but about "*an individual's conformity*" (see Wood, *Passion and Pathology*, 31; emphasis added). In *The Law and the Lady*, Dexter's unusual body both produces his non-conformity and is a metaphor or representation of it; his body may be read symbolically, as part of Collins's criticism of social beliefs about the value of the normative. Moreover, as the novel progresses, Valeria, who supplies the narrative voice, discusses Dexter with increasing sympathy. She begins to feel that society treats Dexter inhumanely and comes to identify with his subject position. While *The Law and the Lady* sometimes presents Dexter as freakish and Dexter sometimes encourages people to regard him as pitiable, the novel also undercuts such "ableist" readings by presenting alternative responses to his disabilities.

In fact, *The Law and the Lady* is particularly complex and unsettling due to the range of commentaries it produces about Dexter. While alternating modes of commentary are more openly deployed in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, here Collins achieves a similarly layered effect via a deliberately contradictory approach to representation. Dexter's unpredictability is part of the novel's critique of contemporary obsessions with classification and with separating the "normal" from the "pathological", or the "normative" from the "non-normative".

The long-standing shortage of critical analysis of Dexter's role in this novel seems surprising, especially given the genuine interest that the novel shows in Dexter. As Catherine Peters has recognized, although Dexter is Collins's "oddest freak of all", he "is

a complex character study, never pitied or condescended to” (Peters, “Introduction”, *Hide and Seek*, xix). He is very important to an understanding of Collins’s responses to disability, and he is central to *The Law and the Lady* since the mystery that Valeria investigates cannot be solved without his help. Such centrality, as we have seen, is not unusual for a disabled character in Collins’s fiction, but was an unusual position for a disabled character in Victorian fiction.

Recent scholarship on Miserrimus Dexter: Degeneration, freakery, the Gothic.

Despite the fact that Miserrimus Dexter may be the most unusual disabled character in Victorian literature, there have been very few critical analyses that discuss his characterization. Moreover, despite the increase in recognition for Collins, and despite the great complexity of this particular novel, *The Law and the Lady* has continued to be regarded as one of Collins’s ‘minor’ novels.

It has been suggested that most Victorian reviewers of *The Law and the Lady* disapproved of Collins’s representation of Miserrimus Dexter, but it is difficult to find proof that this is so.¹⁴⁶ It is, however, evident that when critical interest in Collins began to revive in the 1950s and 1960s, scholars looking at Collins had mixed feelings about Dexter, with Nuell Pharr Davis registering dislike of Dexter’s characterization, but Kenneth Robinson, and later William H. Marshall, showing some appreciation for the character in terms of his symbolic meaning.¹⁴⁷ It should be noted that “realism”, “normality” and “integrated” behaviour are hardly the point of Dexter’s characterization.

Over the last ten to fifteen years *The Law and the Lady* has begun to receive more critical attention, often focused on the novel’s exploration of the “Not Proven” verdict,

¹⁴⁶Ellen Burton Harrington states that Dexter was “universally criticized” in Victorian critical responses to *The Law and the Lady* (Harrington, “From the Lady and the Law to the Lady Detective” (page 7 in online edition)). It is unclear which reviews Harrington refers to; it seems Harrington must have accessed reviews of *The Law and the Lady* not provided in Page’s *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*.

Page’s *Wilkie Collins: the Critical Heritage* refers to only three reviews of *The Law and the Lady*, and in two cases, the references are very brief. He reprints a portion of one review from the *Saturday Review*, and in his “Introduction”, refers very briefly to two other reviews. The *Athenaeum*’s review states that Collins’s “new book is an outrageous burlesque upon himself”, but is not entirely negative. The review does not mention Dexter specifically (*Athenaeum*, 20 February 1875, 258). The anonymous reviewer for the *Saturday Review* notes of Collins: “Characters he cannot draw, and manners he cannot sketch” (Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 13 March 1875, xxxix, 357-8; qtd. in Page, 203), but again does not mention Dexter by name, although, superficially, he might appear to be the most ‘unrealistic’ character in this novel. It is difficult to tell whether either review was representative.

William M. Clarke states that *The Law and the Lady* received some poor reviews when it appeared in serialization, but that “sales were better than the reviews indicated” (*The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, 157).

¹⁴⁷ Robinson refers to Dexter as a “monster” and a “megalomaniac”, and calls him “macabre”, but also states that Dexter may be the “most remarkable feature” of the novel (Robinson, *Wilkie Collins*, 277). Marshall is quite appreciative of Dexter, stating that he adds “imaginative appeal to the novel”, serves a “mythic function”, and adds “intellectual significance” (Marshall, *Wilkie Collins*, 100).

on Valeria's status as a female detective, on Sara Macallan's death, and on problems arising from Victorian marriage law. However, there is also interest in how Dexter's physical disabilities relate to degeneration theory or in the way that his characterization provides a commentary on Victorian gender expectations. Recent readings have related Dexter to the Victorian "freak" show, to ideas of "the Gothic", or have used ideas originated in queer theory. Some of this scholarship has begun to show an appreciation of the complexity of Dexter's characterization. Yet I am still going further than most scholars when I suggest that Dexter is one of Collins's most complex and *convincing* psychological portraits. In the following section I shall assess some of these commentaries, and afterwards conduct my own investigations which shall fill in gaps left by previous research and contribute new readings of the novel.

Teresa Mangum's useful article, "Wilkie Collins: Detection and Deformity" raises the idea of Dexter as "spectacle" and considers his parallels with various "performers" or "specimens" exhibited in Victorian freak shows. Mangum's primary focus is on the language used in and about freak shows, on examining Dexter's exhibitionism, and on explaining the relevance of 'teratology' to any critical reading of Dexter. Mangum regards teratology as the practice of applying labels to objects and assigning objects to specific scientific categories, noting that by grouping objects in this way, scientists are able *to control aspects of representation*, while providing an organising mechanism for examining an object with apparent critical distance or objectivity (Mangum, "Detection and Deformity", 291). However, teratology is generally described as the study of 'birth defects' and physiological abnormality, and the disability theorist J.L. Cherney has even defined it as "the study of monsters" (Cherney, "The Rhetoric of Ableism").¹⁴⁸

Other characters instantly reject Dexter, but nevertheless struggle to assign him to a category. They refer to him via such words as "curiosity, exhibit, exhibition, and eccentricity". Mangum points out that scientific specimens and individuals viewable at freak shows could be referred to as "curiosities" (Mangum, 292-93), and it may be no coincidence that the novel assigns some of Valeria's initial motivation for visiting Dexter to her "curiosity" about him. Collins's novel cleverly aligns Dexter's freakishness with transgressive female curiosity.

¹⁴⁸ See J.L. Cherney, "The Rhetoric of Ableism", at <<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1665/1606>>. Teratology is broadly related to issues of classification. Alison Hennegan explains teratology in relation to the new forms of categorization developed in the later nineteenth century by Charcot, Krafft-Ebing, Lombroso, Havelock Ellis, and Freud, who "were intent on identifying, describing, classifying and explaining the many variations in human physiology, psychology and sexuality". Their research eventually led to those people deemed to be variations from the norm being given the labels of "deviant" or "pervert" (Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles", 202; qtd. in Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain*, 208).

Mangum also notes that Eustace Macallan uses the word “eccentric” as a euphemism for “madness”, labelling any female behaviour that he does not approve of as “eccentricity”. Other characters in the novel express similar attitudes: Dexter’s stigma of eccentricity is transferred to Valeria, because other characters disapprove of her determination to overturn the “Not Proven” verdict (Mangum, 292). As these characters try to dissuade Valeria’s legal curiosity, they treat her as though she is also a “freak”. One of the implicit messages of *The Law and the Lady*, therefore, is that what society calls “madness” may simply be socially disapproved behaviour.

Mary Rosner’s “Deviance in *The Law and the Lady*: The Uneasy Positionings of Mr Dexter” also focuses on the novel’s engagement with teratology and with Darwinian theory. Rosner notes that “monstrous” individuals like Dexter were often considered to be examples of “arrested development”, but her main argument is that Dexter is presented as an example of “degeneration”. Rosner believes that Dexter’s inability to work is a major factor behind why he is presented as “unhealthy”, and, using information sourced from Bruce Haley’s *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, she explains that leading Victorian physiologists believed that a man was healthy only when he was “alive to his environment, and changes as it does” (Haley, 20-21; mentioned in Rosner, “Deviance in *The Law and the Lady*”, 10). Unless one changed in accordance with one’s environment, one would devolve. Dexter’s unhealthiness may also be suggested by the fact that he is not in a “state of functional and structural *wholeness*” (Haley, *ibid.*, 20; qtd. in Rosner, *ibid.*, 10).

Rosner also remarks upon Dexter’s inability to control his emotional responses, and suggests that they indicate physical and mental problems, perhaps related to degenerative processes. She appears to suggest that Dexter’s emotionalism leads to his growing incoherence and delirium (Rosner, *ibid.*, 11), and concludes that his death occurs because of his failure to evolve as a person.

Two further discussions of the novel, by Dennis Denisoff and Catherine Spooner, each consider the novel as a commentary on degeneration, and consider the novel’s relationship to the Gothic. Dennis Denisoff’s article “Framed and Hung: Collins and the Economic Beauty of the Manly Artist” argues that Dexter is not only sensationally Gothic but also that his representation is strongly influenced by concerns about cultural degeneration; he argues that Dexter is “a textbook example of Nordau’s degenerate artist” (Denisoff, “Framed and Hung”, 48). Nordau wrote later in the century than Collins did, and his theories are often associated with the aesthetes of the late nineteenth

century. However, many of the ideas put forward by Nordau had been circulated in other forms earlier in the century by Benedict Morel or by Henry Maudsley (*The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867)) and Cesare Lombroso had also begun his research career by the time Collins wrote *The Law and the Lady*. Collins seems to have been familiar with these earlier forms of degeneration theory.

Denisoff's suggestion that Dexter could be read as a degenerate artist seems valid. Nordau was to claim that degenerates exhibited egoism, impulsiveness, moral insanity, emotionalism, and pessimism (see Nordau, *Degeneration*, 18-9; see also Denisoff, 48). According to Nordau, the degenerate artist rejoices "in his faculty of imagination, which he contrasts with the insipidity of the Philistine", while ignoring reality (Nordau, 21; qtd. in Denisoff, 48). Dexter fits such a description, as he pretends to be Shakespeare and Nelson, creates highly imaginative art, and expresses himself without restraint. Like Nordau's artist, Dexter also has unusual, "refined" tastes (Nordau, 19) - for truffles (*The Law and the Lady*, 245-46) and for unusual music (*The Law and the Lady*, 219-20). His lack of concern about moral appropriateness is shown in his infatuation with Sara and in the way that he launches himself at Valeria.

Denisoff also claims that Dexter undergoes feminization by being made subject to the gaze, and that his "feminine" attire may reflect the relative immobility associated with his disability. This immobility may also reflect "the assumedly natural passivity" of Victorian women - a passivity and immobility that was exacerbated by restrictive clothing (Denisoff, 49). Denisoff's observation parallels the ideas of some disability theorists, who note that the disabled are frequently described in feminine terms or placed in positions of diminished power. Denisoff therefore notices that the discourses of degeneration in *The Law and the Lady* comment on many facets of Victorian society. It is therefore very curious that Denisoff concludes that Collins does *not* seem to have complex personal or cultural reasons behind the creation of Dexter; instead, he suggests that Dexter is simply "a collection of significations" "characteristic of the popular tastes and interests of the time" (Denisoff, 52).

Catherine Spooner also aligns Dexter with the concerns of degeneration theory, specifically in relation to the Gothic tradition. Dexter's extravagant dress and dandyism (Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*, 97-8)¹⁴⁹ aligns him with the degenerate aesthetes later identified by Nordau. His extravagant clothing and role-playing could be read as signs of his degeneration, since Nordau later stated that male degenerates "try to present

¹⁴⁹ *The Law and the Lady* also suggests a link between Dexter and the Byronic hero (214).

something that they are not” (Nordau, *Degeneration*, 9; qtd. in Spooner, 102). For Nordau, “affectation of difference in costume, is sign of disease” (Spooner, 102). Meanwhile, Nordau not only considered that degenerates were incurable, but that they *could infect* “otherwise healthy” people with degeneracy (Spooner, 102; my emphasis) – an idea that is highly reminiscent of attitudes expressed in *The Law and the Lady*.

Drawing on insights from Eve Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* and Judith Halberstam’s *Skin Shows*, Spooner argues that *The Law and the Lady* is a particularly Gothic text. She notes that the “Gothic is fundamentally stagy and theatrical” (Spooner, 1), and that “Gothic selves are multiple, performative and dispersed across a continuum of appearances” (Spooner, 5). Spooner suggests that *The Law and the Lady* could be placed firmly in the Gothic tradition, due to its many references to “costumes and disguises, veils and masks” and to “bodily fragmentation and masquerade” (see Spooner, *ibid.*, 1, and 102).

Kate Flint’s article “Disability and Difference” once again provides only a brief discussion of Dexter’s disability. However, it provides perhaps the most useful consideration of Dexter’s significance; Flint makes several original claims about Dexter that have not been advanced by other critics, and she remarks upon some recurring tendencies of Collins’s writing about disability. Flint notes Dexter’s “extraordinary mental capacities”, and rather than view his acting as merely suggestive of a “freak-show exhibit”, she states that he “claims the talents of a serious performer” (Flint, “Disability and Difference”, 156). She thus chooses to read Dexter’s “imaginative projection” as an “aptitude” rather than as a sign of mania. She also observes that with Dexter, Collins both draws on and mutates the Victorian tradition of presenting male characters with disabilities as feminised and especially peevish (Flint, 155).

Very importantly, Flint notes that a major facet of Collins’s fiction is its consistent suggestion of a lack of distinction between the disabled and the able-bodied. She explains that one way Collins encourages reader identification with his disabled characters is by stressing the disabled characters’ capacity for romantic or physical love: “Strong affective plots are used to hook in the readers, and to make them care about the emotions of the disabled”. But also simply by describing disabled characters, their emotions, and the workings of their senses, Collins’s texts evoke “the conditions of disablement” “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). Via such strategies, Collins rejects stances toward the disabled that involve “distancing and

categorization” (Flint, 165). Flint’s observations about the use of romantic plotlines ring true, as in all four novels studied here, *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret*, *Poor Miss Finch*, and *The Law and the Lady*, Collins depicts someone “non-normative” as romantically desiring, or as desirable.

Another form of critical response to Dexter’s characterization is the critical attempt to identify a real-life source that may have inspired his creation. Examples of this occur in the articles by Teresa Mangum and Mary Rosner, who both state that the most likely inspiration for Dexter’s characterization is the performer Harvey Leach (or Leech) who appeared in freak shows during the 1830s and 1840s. Leach was well-known for appearing in P. T. Barnum’s exhibit called “What Is It?”, in which he “stood in a cage and ate raw meat in order to represent some kind of missing link” (Rosner, “Deviance”, 14).¹⁵⁰ Mary Rosner quotes one Victorian description of Leach that bears a similarity to descriptions of Dexter:

Leach “exhibits the very rare combination of perfect symmetry, strength, and beauty, with a great amount of deformity. The head is remarkably fine in form, and the expression intelligent and benign; the chest, shoulders, and arms form a perfect model of strength and beauty, the arms are exceedingly muscular, and the hands very well and strongly formed ... In the place of legs there are two limbs, the left about 18 inches from the hip to the point of the toes, the right about 24 inches from the same points. The feet are natural” (the *Times* newspaper, qtd. in Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 126-27; in turn qtd. in Rosner, “Deviance in *The Law and the Lady*”, 13).

In *The Law and the Lady* Valeria’s narration stresses Dexter’s “unusually handsome” face and his “manly beauty” (213); Dexter and Leach also share a passion for leaping.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Rosner’s work is that she is the only critic who takes significant note of the illustrations that accompanied *The Law and the Lady*’s original serialization in *The Graphic*, and to suggest that these illustrations depict Dexter’s process of degeneration. Later in this section, I shall discuss these illustrations in more detail (see page 171); my interest in them was prompted by Rosner’s discussion. Teresa Mangum also refers to these illustrations, but extremely briefly, stating that “the

¹⁵⁰ P.T. Barnum’s sideshows took place in the United States, but the acts included in his shows were well known to the British public. If Leach were a source for Dexter’s characterization, perhaps Dexter’s eating of truffles could allude to Leach’s consumption of raw meat. Rosner also relates how Leach had “stained skin”; this might have some relation to Sara Macallan’s wish to improve her complexion. Since Leach’s disability is the same as Dexter’s, he is attractive as a possible source for Dexter. However, there is no proof that Collins knew about Leach, so regarding Leach as an influence on Dexter’s characterisation seems to rely on Leach’s reputation as a performer, or to rely on Charles Dickens providing a link. Richard Altick notes that Dickens witnessed the “What is It” exhibition that involved Leach (see Altick, *The Shows of London*, 266), so Dickens may have passed on information about Leach to Collins.

drawings of Miserrimus Dexter counteract characters' claims about his extraordinary appearance, portraying Dexter as a round-shouldered, sad-faced elderly gentleman in a wheelchair who peers intensely and somewhat anxiously at the reader" (Mangum, "Wilkie Collins", 287-288). Mangum supposes that any illustrations representing Dexter as frail contradict the text's description of Dexter as handsome; this does not seem to take account of the fact that the novel describes Dexter's process of deterioration from having a youthful appearance to looking old; moreover, Dexter only appears as a "sad-faced elderly gentleman" in *two* of the illustrations in *The Graphic*.

Catherine Peters's analysis of *The Law and the Lady* in *The King of Inventors* is unusual in the degree of attention it awards to Dexter. Peters asserts that Dexter replicates personality traits of Collins's friend, the famous mid-Victorian actor Charles Fechter (Peters, *The King of Inventors*, 375). She supports this assertion by noting that Fechter studied both art and literature before becoming an actor. However, the identification of Dexter with Fechter seems to rely heavily on both being flamboyant actors, even though *The Law and the Lady* seems to give greater emphasis to some of Dexter's other forms of artistic talent. Peters also mentions that Fechter was highly eccentric and that some acquaintances considered him to harbour latent insanity (Peters, *ibid.*, 375). She suggests that Fechter's second wife Lizzie Price may be a possible source for Ariel; this suggestion may be of interest as Fechter had married Price bigamously, something which may have inspired Collins's having Eustace Macallan marry without mentioning his first wife (see Peters, *ibid.*, 376).¹⁵¹

The contemporary obituary and coroner's report for Fechter do describe him as mentally unstable, while other sources describe him as a megalomaniac.¹⁵² Fechter, both famous and notorious, might have seemed like an attractive person on whom to base a character, and although he moved to North America in 1870, he would still have been remembered by many in England in 1875. However, the proofs for identifying Fechter as a source for Dexter are not very solid, and I do not agree that Fechter is a likely basis for Dexter's characterization, precisely because he had been such a close acquaintance of

¹⁵¹ Dexter does not physically resemble Charles Fechter, or appear to be a heavy drinker. Nor, despite his mistreatment of Ariel, does he seem especially bad tempered. However, the most unconvincing part of Peters's argument is the suggestion that Dexter's "leglessness" may represent a pun about Fechter's frequent drunkenness (*The King of Inventors*, 376). Even if such a pun occurred to Collins, it would seem a very slight basis for the creation of a character with a serious congenital condition.

¹⁵² For an Obituary, see the listing for "Charles Fechter's Death: Termination of a Long Illness" in my 'Works Cited'; for a Coroner's report, see the listing for "The Late Charles Fechter, Results of the Autopsy – His Burial Yesterday". See also an article by Richard Foulkes located at the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* website: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101009245/Charles-Fechter>>.

Collins,¹⁵³ and because Fechter was still alive at the time of the publication of *The Law and the Lady*. It should also be noted that shortly after Fechter's death in 1879, the journalist Kate Field wrote a biography of Fechter. Collins was one of the first people that Field approached to write a memoir of the actor, and Collins responded by writing an essay that was not negative, but rather extremely positive.¹⁵⁴

Moreover, the suggestion that Collins's characters were closely based on real life acquaintances actually contradicts Collins's commentaries about how he generally conceived of his characters. In various Prefaces to his novels and responses to fan enquiries, Collins informed readers that it was *not* his usual practice to base an individual character on the qualities of one particular real-life person. He stated that his characters generally reflected the personality traits and features of a conglomeration of different people he had met (see the letter to Arthur Locker in Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Volume II*, 315; Peters, "Introduction", *Poor Miss Finch*, xiv; and Sutherland, "Introduction", *The Woman in White*, vii), but that they were also products of his imagination (probably aided by knowledge gained from extensive reading).¹⁵⁵

The search for 'real-life' bases for Collins's characters seems to be linked to recent criticism's tendency to over-emphasise the autobiographical features of Collins's texts. Many critics have shown a strong desire to connect Collins's own physical ailments to the ailments experienced by his characters. As some other critics (including Martha Stoddard Holmes) have noted, this reductive tendency suggests that Collins could have no motivation for representing disabled characters other than that he himself had suffered illnesses or impairment.¹⁵⁶ This would seem to minimize the humanistic motivations that Collins expressed in some of the Prefaces and authorial notes that accompanied his novels, in which he asserts a desire to change how certain disabilities have been represented and to influence how disability is regarded by the public. It is also apparent that Collins had *intellectual* interests in disability and psychology. While Collins's health

¹⁵³ In "Appendix C" of *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, William M. Clarke notes that Fechter appears in Wilkie Collins's bank account listings several times (Clarke, 229). In 1873, Collins visited Fechter in the United States (Clarke, *ibid.*, 151). Fechter also knew Charles Collins, Wilkie's brother (Clarke, *ibid.*, 127-8).

¹⁵⁴ Field's biography of Fechter, titled *Charles Albert Fechter*, appeared in 1882. In his memoir of Fechter Collins praises him as the best actor of his time and as a great friend (Field, *Charles Albert Fechter*, 154). Collins admits Fechter could be unstable, but he refuses to say or quote anything that will cause readers to receive a bad impression of Fechter (Field, 159-60).

¹⁵⁵ Collins's letter to Locker is dated 18 January 1872. William Baker's *Wilkie Collins's Library: A Reconstruction* provides lists of the books that Collins is known to have read or to have had in his possession.

¹⁵⁶ See Stoddard Holmes, "'Bolder with her Lover'", 85.

did deteriorate in his middle age, even the novels written while he was a young man display a strong sense of compassion or concern for the disabled and the mentally ill. I suggest it is this mixture of humanitarian concern and intellectual interest that drives Collins's representations of disability, not a fixation on his own health. Therefore, while I wish to discuss another real-life individual whose case has very interesting parallels with elements of Dexter's representation, I do so acknowledging that in many cases it may not ever be possible to locate or prove specific biographical, personal, or cultural influences for Collins's characters.

In her "Introduction" to *The Law and the Lady*, Jenny Bourne Taylor makes mention of the Victorian painter Richard Dadd, suggesting that Dexter's "painting could be a parody of Fuseli or of Richard Dadd's 'Sketches to Illustrate the Passions'" ("Introduction", *The Law and the Lady*, xxiii).¹⁵⁷ However, apart from this artistic connection, there is another very interesting possible connection between the two, because Richard Dadd had schizophrenia and was involved in a famous murder.

Richard Dadd was a successful painter during the early 1840s, but in 1843 he began to suffer from a mental illness (websites containing modern appraisals of Dadd describe his mental illness in various ways; the most common description of his illness is "paranoid schizophrenia", followed by "manic depression" and "bipolar disorder").¹⁵⁸ Believing himself to be spoken to by devils, Dadd attacked and killed his own father. Although Dadd was insane, he was regarded as guilty of the murder, and sent to the criminal ward of Bethlem Hospital.

It seems very likely that Collins would have been familiar with Dadd's history or with his artwork. Not only was the murder highly publicized, but Collins had very strong connections with both the art world and with a number of Lunacy Commissioners.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ I have not followed up on the reference to Fuseli, partly due to lack of time and space, but also because Fuseli's subject matter and style do not seem to bear as much resemblance to Dexter's art as Dadd's appears to do. It is of interest however, that Collins's father studied under Fuseli (see *Hide and Seek*, 118).

¹⁵⁸ A BBC show called *The Victorians part 4: Dreams and Nightmares* (BBC One, 8th March 2009) cited probable "paranoid schizophrenia", while <http://www.noumenal.com/marc/dadd/> cites "manic-depressive or bipolar disorder".

¹⁵⁹ Some examples of Collins's possible links to Dadd include the following: Both Richard Dadd and his work were known to people within Collins's circle. In the 1840s Collins's father and Collins himself were involved in the art world. Before his insanity, Dadd had been part of a group at the Royal Academy called 'The Clique', which included Frith, Maclise, and Augustus Egg (see Alderidge, 14). Frith and, especially, Egg, were later very good friends with Collins. Augustus Egg was the probable sitter for one of Richard Dadd's early portraits (see Alderidge, 56). In 1857 it was Egg who arranged for works by Dadd to be included in an exhibition at Manchester (Alderidge, 36). John Forster, a mutual friend of Dickens and Collins, owned a Dadd drawing, 'Patriotism' (Alderidge, 35). 'The Clique' also encouraged the younger artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Collins had extremely strong connections with the Brotherhood, enjoying friendships with John Everett Millais and Holman Hunt. His brother Charles Collins was sometimes considered a member of the Brotherhood. Collins was considered to be an authority on art (see

Charles Dickens is even more likely as a possible source of knowledge about Dadd; several anecdotes survive about Dickens having a penchant for re-enacting Dadd's murder of his father when walking with friends in Cobham Park (Allderidge, *The Late Richard Dadd*, 35).¹⁶⁰ Dadd became a more obscure figure after his incarceration in Bethlem Hospital in 1843, and the fame of his parricide would have receded. However, Dadd's biographer Patricia Allderidge notes that a certain amount of Dadd's work "was always in circulation"; for example, in 1870, thirty-three works by Dadd "found their way into the market" (Allderidge, 35).

The strongest hint of a possible connection lies in the fact that Richard Dadd's artwork does share many similarities with the way that *The Law and the Lady* describes the works of Miserrimus Dexter. The art created by Dadd in the 1830s and 1840s, and even after the onset of his insanity, engages with themes similar to those present in Dexter's art. In the early part of his career, Dadd was known for his eerie portrayals of "fairy scenes" and scenes from Shakespeare (Allderidge, 16-17). In what may be a coincidence, Dexter's role play involves his re-enacting scenes from Shakespeare, or claiming to be Shakespeare himself (*The Law and the Lady*, 206). Dexter identifies himself with Prospero and nicknames his servant 'Ariel' (209), while Valeria discusses how children enjoy adopting the persona of a fairy (221). Meanwhile, the style of art they produced is similar: Dadd was primarily described as an "imaginative" painter (Allderidge, op cit., 9); when Valeria views Dexter's art, she takes note of an inscription stating that his art is not naturalistic, but "imaginative" (229).

The most interesting similarity, mentioned by Jenny Bourne Taylor, is that in 1853, after the onset of his insanity, Richard Dadd began painting a long sequence of works entitled "Sketches to Illustrate the Passions". This group of sketches and paintings included over thirty works (Allderidge, 30), which focus almost exclusively on potentially destructive passions. Passions depicted in this cycle include "Greed", "Avarice", "Melancholia" (an old man standing alone by a cliff), "Senility", "Agony – Raging Madness" (generally supposed to be a self-portrait), "Revenge", and "Murder" (in which Cain kills Abel with a club).¹⁶¹

Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, 201). Wilkie's friend Bryan Procter was a Legal Commissioner of Lunacy (from 1845-60) and John Forster was a Secretary to the Lunacy Commission (from 1858-61) and a Commissioner of Lunacy (from 1861-72).

¹⁶⁰ Patricia Allderidge notes that this story is found in *Edmund Yates, His Recollections and Experiences*, 1884, II, p. 104, and that it is repeated in other sources (see Allderidge, 35).

¹⁶¹ While only a minority of Dadd's paintings are explicitly violent, his oeuvre contains paintings on topics such as the death of the martyr Dymrna (about to be beheaded by her father – perhaps a source for Dexter's painting of the death of a martyr), "The Murder of Richard II", The Closet Scene from Hamlet (in

Miserrimus Dexter's art displays a very similar focus and has an extremely similar name: "Illustrations of the Passions". Dexter's "Illustrations" show a preoccupation with violence and mistreatment, including paintings of a man disembowelling a horse, and a martyr being flayed. As with Dadd's works, many of Dexter's pieces bear one word titles such as "Revenge" and "Cruelty" (229). After viewing Dexter's artwork, Valeria concludes that Dexter has a "diseased and riotous delight ... in representing Horrors" (229). However, other topics covered by Dexter include "The Life of the Wandering Jew" and the wanderings of "The Flying Dutchman", figures which are generally regarded as symbols of social alienation.¹⁶² Again, this shows a probable link to Richard Dadd, as many of Dadd's paintings also show sympathy for figures who are outcasts or in exile (for example, "Melancholia", "Agony – Raving Madness", and "Crazy Jane").

The possible identification between Richard Dadd and Dexter becomes even more fascinating when one considers that Dadd's friends and family identified *sensory overload* as the primary catalyst for Dadd's insanity. According to his family, Dadd had been a totally 'normal' young man until he began a world trip that involved visiting ancient sites in Egypt and the Middle East. It was only on this trip that Dadd began exhibiting signs of mental instability. Dadd was aware of his growing instability, and began writing letters home in which he described his feelings of "sensory overload" (Allderidge, 23).¹⁶³ Later, his friends, family, and doctors placed the blame for Dadd's insanity on his susceptibility to a barrage of sensual and religious impressions received on his trip. For example, witnessing scenes of pagan religious ceremony may have been the catalyst for his obsession with Egyptian gods and his delusion that these gods had told him to eradicate evil by killing his father (Allderidge, 22, 24).

The idea of over-susceptibility to sensory overload finds an interesting correlation in *The Law and the Lady*, where it is suggested that Dexter's sensory and imaginative overload may contribute to his mental pathology and speed up his decline. Before Dexter testifies at Eustace's trial, one doctor describes Dexter's nervous and mental state thus:

"there is undoubtedly latent insanity in this case ... That he will end in madness (if he lives), I entertain little or no doubt. The question of *when* the madness will show itself, depends entirely on the state of his health. His

which the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears), "Revenge", and "Murder". Another work shows David contemplating whether to kill Saul ("David Sparing the Life of Saul"), while others show characters having disagreements (such as "Contradiction", in which Oberon and Titania argue).

¹⁶² Lawrence Kramer identifies the Flying Dutchman and the Wandering Jew as figures who wander the world seeking forgiveness by telling their stories (Kramer, *After the Lovedeath*, 196).

¹⁶³ Allderidge refers to Dadd's letter to David Roberts, dated 24 February 1843. See Allderidge, 155, note 28.

nervous system is highly sensitive ... If he conquers the bad habits to which I have alluded ... he may last as a sane man for years to come. If he persists in his present way of life ... his lapse into insanity must infallibly take place” (*The Law and the Lady*, 281-82).

Dexter’s remaining sane is posited as dependent on his protecting his nervous system and maintaining a certain degree of equanimity; presumably, a similar position to that experienced by Dadd prior to his too-stimulating trip.¹⁶⁴

Major Fitz-David assures Valeria that Dexter is unlikely to be violent (*The Law and the Lady*, 191), and indeed, Dexter never becomes homicidal. However, Dexter does have a potential for violence, as is apparent when he lunges at Valeria¹⁶⁵ and when he beats Ariel. His morbidity is shown by his collections of the heads of famous murderers and the flayed skin of a woman (247). Mr Playmore actually views Dexter as Sara’s probable murderer (277). Eventually, even Valeria begins to feel doubts about Dexter’s possible involvement in Sara’s death (see 251, 265-69, 290, and 315). *The Law and the Lady* plays with the idea that Dexter may be Sara’s killer, and by this means perhaps provides a further allusion to Dadd, the real-life artist and murderer.

Any identification of Dexter with Richard Dadd can only be putative, but the possibility of a link between the two is intriguing. Moreover, by examining discourses related to the Dadd case we can observe that Collins’s novel engages with what were very present contemporary concerns about the potentially harmful effects of an over-active imagination, the problems caused by hereditary physical and mental conditions, and the difficulties of fighting mental illnesses via ‘moral management’.

Dexter may also share some features of another Barnum performer, General Tom Thumb, one of whose acts was to dress up as Napoleon. Another possible source for Dexter’s characterization, and perhaps another particularly strong contender, may be the tale called “Hop-Frog” (1849) by Edgar Allan Poe. Poe’s short story may provide a basis for Dexter’s appearance as grotesque ‘frog’; Poe’s story tells the story of an evil dwarf who takes revenge on a king who mistreats him. The dwarf, ‘Hop-Frog’ has a female attendant, Tripetta (see Poe, “Hop Frog”, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Tales and Sketches 1843-1849*, 1343-55). If Collins was influenced by any of these sources –

¹⁶⁴ I have identified two further details that may indicate a connection between Dadd and Dexter. During his appearance in court, Dadd’s behaviour varied wildly: “at times he seemed to take a rational interest in the proceedings ... at others he became wildly excited and incoherent” (Allderidge, 26). This is similar to Mrs Macallan’s assertion that Dexter “mixed up sense and nonsense” during his appearance at the murder trial (*The Law and the Lady*, 199). Secondly, if Collins did think of Dadd when writing this novel, this may also explain Dexter’s odd culinary tastes (Dadd displayed an obsession with eggs; Allderidge, 23).

¹⁶⁵ This violence raises the vague possibility of a rape occurring in a Victorian novel; the editor of *The Graphic* tried to remove this part of Collins’s text (see “Note on the Text”, *The Law and the Lady*, xxv).

Dadd's life and paintings, Poe's story, or Barnum's performers - this may indicate that Collins's inspiration for creating Dexter came from an amalgamation of various cultural phenomena, in addition to showing the influence of degeneration theory and other forms of psychological thought.

While I have discussed the frequent focus on the scientific and cultural paradigm of degeneration in previous analyses of *The Law and the Lady*, I wish to suggest that we may extend this analysis even further, and read Dexter's eccentricity and degeneration as a symbol of the status that the sensation novel genre held with Victorian reviewers. The sensation novel genre was often cited as a sign of the degeneration of the public's literary taste and moral standards, even if some literary critics expressed confusion over whether sensational literature was a "cause of socio-cultural decay", or only "a symptom of a deterioration that was already happening" (Radford, 5). However the process was understood, various critics considered sensation fiction to be pathological. *The Law and the Lady*'s concern with degeneration can therefore be linked not only to concerns about biology but also to concerns over the status of "culture".

For sensation fiction's harshest critic, H. L. Mansel, it was dangerous because of its apparently negative effect on the bodies and nerves of its readers. Mansel believed that sensation fiction bypassed any considered reflection in the reader, conjuring "up a corporeal rather than a cerebral response" (see Radford, 11; see also Mansel, "Sensation Novels").¹⁶⁶ My suggestion is that Collins's depiction of Dexter may contain a self-reflexive and meta-textual joke related to the idea that readers of sensation fiction would overwork their brain, and mentally degenerate until they were in a state of debility. Previously, Kate Flint has advanced a related idea, stating that Dexter may function as a representative of the reader of sensation fiction: "he is given over to identification, to concentrating on the matter at hand to the exclusion of the 'real world', to obsessive involvement with following a plot, and he collapses with eventual enervation" (Flint, 156). As Andrew Radford notes, Mansel strenuously disapproved of sensation fiction's "unwholesome interest in deviant figures" (Radford, 11); Dexter is certainly a good example of such deviancy, exhibiting unusual psychology and behaviour and the excess and "hybridity"¹⁶⁷ frequently apparent in sensation fiction. His characterization

¹⁶⁶ At this point, Radford paraphrases points made in Alison Winter's *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*.

¹⁶⁷ In the "Introduction" to *Victorian Sensations*, Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina describe sensation fiction as a hybrid genre (Harrison and Fantina, "Introduction", xi, xiv). This idea has also appeared in Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British*

contradicts the value that literary reviewers of the mid-Victorian period often placed on consistency in characterization: reviewers generally affirmed the view that literature should “obey the formal rules of coherence and continuity”, and that all actions taken by a character should be “explicable”, reflecting that the self was a unified entity (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 195). Such views are not espoused by Collins, as is clear from his “Note: Addressed to the Reader”. *The Law and the Lady* is a good example of why sensation texts were seen “to privilege pathology” or to suggest that aberrant thought and behaviour were actually “mimetic of contemporary life” (Shuttleworth, *ibid*, 192). Like sensation fiction itself, Dexter is both realistic and grotesque, “half one thing and half another” (see Mangum, 294). However, underneath the surface grotesqueness, his representation questions how society judges and stigmatizes the non-normative, and disrupts the tendency of much literature to omit representations of the Other (see Davis, “Constructing Normalcy”, 22).

Dexter’s appearance, and other characters’ responses to him.

While the analyses of Dexter just discussed are informative, there are still elements of his characterization that have not been fully considered, the examination of which would greatly aid our understanding of disability-related issues in this novel. In the following sections I provide new insights into how Collins’s representation of Dexter suggests provocative ideas about insanity, social obsessions with appearance, and gender roles in Victorian society. The novel certainly uses Dexter’s disability in a more traditional way when it employs it as a symbolic tool for introducing discussions of social problems; however, it does so in an extremely complex manner. In addition, the novel represents Dexter’s physical disability in ways that appear practically and scientifically realistic, and features a consideration of how a physical disability might affect someone psychologically. Dexter’s physical disability appears to have a more harmful psychological effect than sensory disabilities are shown to have in Collins’s earlier novels. In this section, I shall consider the issues I have just raised, and investigate how Dexter’s characterization draws on various forms of scientific knowledge; previous criticism has not fully explored the degree to which *The Law and the Lady* engages with Victorian scientific theories. I focus largely on Dexter since he is the key to understanding this novel’s engagement with ideas relating to physical, mental, and social

Fiction, 147, and Lyn Pykett’s “Sensation and the fantastic in the Victorian novel”, 203, as well as other studies.

disability, but I also show that discourses of disability present in this novel tie Dexter closely to Valeria, the novel's heroine, and are used to emphasise the concept of Victorian womanhood as disability.

Miserrimus Dexter first appears to the reader of the novel, and simultaneously to the novel's lead character Valeria, in a courtroom, via the medium of a court transcript. At this point he is presented within a mediated 'frame', twice removed from the reader: first via the seemingly factual descriptions of the court transcript (which are not embedded verbatim in the text, but paraphrased by Valeria), and again via Valeria's biased and emotional responses to the transcript (narrated after the fact). The issue of who gets to control representations of Dexter or interpret his 'meaning' is immediately implicit, as is the issue of 'naming'.

Dexter explains to the court that his name, Miserrimus, means "most unhappy" (*The Law and the Lady*, 173-74). He is so named because his father assumed that anyone without legs could only be unhappy in life.¹⁶⁸ ¹⁶⁹ Therefore, Dexter is immediately identified with his disability and as someone who should be miserable. Meanwhile, the audience in the courtroom are shocked by Dexter's appearance; he is a "strange and startling" spectacle: "literally the half of a man" (173). Dexter's physical non-normality continues to horrify other characters throughout the novel when they realise that his body consists of only a head, torso, and arms.

Collins uses Dexter to investigate social ideas of the normative and the non-normative and how society draws boundaries between these two apparent poles. *The Law and the Lady* also displays psychological penetration by exploring possible *sources* for the discomfort felt by those who look at Dexter; what is it that makes people discomforted when they encounter the non-normative? Valeria, for example, realizes that the major source of the discomfort she feels in relation to Dexter arises from a sense of disappointment that he is not what he first appears to be. She notes that on first impression, Dexter is very good looking. She describes his extremely handsome face, his manly chest, his intelligent and sensitive expression, and even states that any young woman looking at Dexter for the first time would exclaim: "here is the hero of my dreams!" (214). Yet Valeria insists that Dexter's disability creates a problem, because all

¹⁶⁸ Dexter's very first discussion of himself mentions the negative response that his parents had to his disability. It seems probable their response shaped his entire self-image. This may be compared to Sara Macallan's internalization of her husband's apparently negative views about her physical appearance.

¹⁶⁹ Jenny Bourne Taylor points out that Dexter's "surname is Latin for 'right'" (suggesting deftness and mental agility), and also a pun on "writer" ("Explanatory Notes", *The Law and the Lady*, 424; note correlating with p. 174 of the novel).

who meet him are in for a shock and disappointment when they discover that he has no legs. Her reaction implies that Dexter's disability instantly cancels out his good looks and any sex appeal he might have otherwise had. The shock felt by those who meet Dexter is not only prompted by their belief that he is grotesque, but also by their feelings of *aesthetic* disappointment, an idea implicit in the term "*deformed*".¹⁷⁰

The text also suggests that able-bodied characters respond to Dexter with alarm because their interactions with him prompt a sense of the uncanny. The 'uncanny' is felt when people encounter the unusual or the unexpected, but especially when the object looked upon appears simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. This may cause a sense of unease, a mixture of attraction and repulsion, or even complete horror (see Freud, "The Uncanny", 345, 347).¹⁷¹ As originally theorized by Freud and later by Jacques Lacan, the fear of the uncanny arises when the onlooker is not immediately able to understand and classify the object that they look upon, or when the object prompts a sense of cognitive dissonance. While Freud's theory was not developed until after Collins's novel appeared, it is apparent in *The Law and the Lady* that able-bodied characters who meet Dexter are upset by their inability to comprehend what he is, and dismayed by his physical incongruence. The characters' inability to define Dexter causes them to feel threatened, and in their resultant panic they resort to labelling him negatively – so as to separate his frightening disability from themselves. They label Dexter with pejorative names such as "monkey" (207), "half tiger, half monkey" (194), "creature" (207), "bird" (209), "imp" (210), "Indian idol" (292), "Thing" (292), "deformed creature" (300), and "centaur" (206). Various able-bodied characters also attack his mental state: Major Fitz-David refers to Dexter as "crack-brained" (193) even *before* it becomes apparent that Dexter is losing control of his mental processes. The novel displays a strong awareness of the motivations behind such forms of othering.

Dexter's disturbing appearance is exaggerated even further by his ambiguous gender performance. While he otherwise appears masculine, Dexter also has an air of effeminacy due to his flamboyant clothing, his emotionalism and his hobbies such as cooking and embroidery.¹⁷² While this juxtaposition creates a further sense of cognitive dissonance, Dexter's mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics is also part of the

¹⁷⁰ This sense of aesthetic disappointment caused by an unexpected juxtaposition of beauty and 'ugliness' repeats an idea also present in Collins's *The Woman in White* when Walter is shocked by Marian's appearance (*The Woman in White*, 31-32).

¹⁷¹ Julia Kristeva's theory of the *abject* also has relevance here (see references to abjection in the introductory section of this thesis: "Introduction to Disability and Disability Studies").

¹⁷² Dexter's unusual clothing also aligns him with the Gothic, as clothing is "a discursive mechanism in the production of Gothic bodies" (see Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, 17).

novel's implication of a connection between disability and femininity. The idea of a connection between disability and femininity is not uncommon in literary depictions of disability, but Collins uses this trope self-consciously to shake readers' assumptions about gender roles.

As the novel progresses Valeria begins to question the othering directed toward Dexter and the accuracy of the labels that others place on him. The novel *does* present Dexter as a 'dangerous' character in some ways: he is unpredictable and sadistic, and the novel ends with his death, suggestive, perhaps, of a final need to wipe him out. Despite this, Dexter also emerges as humanized, intelligent, talented, sometimes likeable, and his death is not without pathos: despite Dexter's troubling behaviour, his portrayal is primarily *sympathetic*; in fact, it tends toward suggesting the possibility of the seemingly able-bodied *identifying* with disabled people. Dexter's primary role is to challenge scientific and social assumptions. He plays a major part in Collins's assault on restricted conceptions of 'normality'.

References to associationism and to degeneration theory.

In the introductory section of this thesis, I provided information about the developing fields of Victorian psychology, psychiatry, and physiology. Within this introductory subsection, I focused primarily on how Victorian psychology was dominated by associationist theory, and I also discussed the Victorian theory of 'degeneration'.¹⁷³ I shall now expand on these ideas, as some background knowledge of Victorian science is needed in order to understand how *The Law and the Lady* uses Dexter and Valeria to make provocative statements about forms of disability.

The Law and the Lady displays a great deal of interest in the interaction between the mind and the body; on close inspection, the novel is dominated by allusions to contemporary scientific debates that questioned the Cartesian duality of the human body and mind and by allusions to psychological associationism. Another theory which influences *The Law and the Lady* is the theory of "degeneration" which reflected Victorian anxieties about the body, psychological processes, and neurology, as well as about the perceived decline of cultural standards.

The novel's engagement with such topics is surprisingly complex, but not in itself surprising, since "sensation fiction" was not only a genre dealing with thrilling or taboo topics, but one interested in physiology and in sensory effects upon the body and mind.

¹⁷³ Readers wishing to refer back to this earlier discussion will find it on pages 32 to 34 of this thesis.

Appropriately, Collins was interested in a wide range of scientific theories; one of his major interests being the psychological theory of “associationism”. Lyn Pykett notes that “Associationism was the philosophical foundation of much psychological theory in the mid-nineteenth century” and it was linked to the concept of ‘sensation’. The operation of the five senses requires that the brain transmits sensation. After taking in information via the senses, the brain transmits the resultant feelings, emotion, and affect:

Associationism developed a model of the mind as a receiver and translator of sensations. The mind was conceived as a blank sheet (or, as Locke put it, a *tabula rasa*) which received sensations, translated them into *ideas* of sensations, and then linked them together according to principles of similarity, proximity, or causality ... Most nineteenth-century Associationists saw this process of linking or association as having a physiological basis in the brain and neurological system (Pykett, *Wilkie Collins*, 178-79).

Nerves and the brain were likely to hold an inherent interest for any writer of sensation fiction, and Collins was particularly “well informed on current research into complex issues such as the brain’s unconscious activity” (Wood, 2). However, his characterization of Dexter may also betray the influence of older theories related to the melancholic or nervous temperaments, or to the way that emotions could “depress the nervous constitution” and make “the body more susceptible to bodily disease” (Wood, 35).

By mid-century many Victorian scientists emphasised the interrelationship between the mind and the body and accepted that a variety of diseases or disorders could affect both mental and physical functioning. Collins’s work reflects such beliefs, almost invariably depicting the mind and body as being closely intertwined, often suggesting that any alteration to the body is certain to affect a character’s mind or psychological state, or vice versa. However, his fiction also debates whether characters can escape the effects of this interaction.

Issues related to Victorian psychiatric and psychological theory are also engaged with whenever *The Law and the Lady* debates the importance of ‘rationality’. This moral and scientific ideal had been much emphasised in the Enlightenment and remained a social ideal during the Victorian period. However, Collins’s characterization of Dexter and the success of Valeria’s intuitive detective work suggest that the nineteenth century overvalues rationality. Collins even reveals in his prefatory Note for this novel that the primary purpose of *The Law and the Lady* is to question the idea that human behaviour is “invariably governed by the laws of pure reason” (“Note: Addressed to the Reader”, *The Law and the Lady*, 3).

Within Britain, the main proponent of writing about degeneration was Henry Maudsley, whose work was influential in the 1870s and 1880s. However, Maudsley's work was heavily influenced by the Morel's earlier *Traité des Dégénérescences*, and conceptions of degeneration were not new in Britain in the 1870s (see Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 211-12). Jenny Bourne Taylor suggests that 'by the mid-1870s' degeneration was a dominant conceptual paradigm (Taylor, *ibid.*, 212).¹⁷⁴ Such theories are therefore likely to have been familiar to a large proportion of Collins's reading public when *The Law and the Lady* was published.

Lyn Pykett has observed that the overwhelming proportion of the biological, psychological and social issues that Collins was interested in can "be subsumed together under the general heading of degeneration" (Pykett, *Wilkie Collins*, 181-82). Similarly, Jenny Bourne Taylor believes that a particular interest in degeneration is discernible throughout *all* of Collins's fiction, showing up most obviously in his exploration of questions relating to "inheritance and transmission" and the theories of psychiatric "moral management" (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 212).¹⁷⁵ Taylor also notes an increasing preoccupation with scientific theories in Collins's novels of the 1870s and 1880s, and states her belief that these novels attempt "to overturn" some of the assumptions of "the narrative of degeneration" (Taylor, *ibid.*, 211).¹⁷⁶

Although Collins would only have been able to consider his characters in the light of early degeneration theory, it seems he was familiar with the concepts involved from quite early in his career, as evidenced by his creation of the effete aristocrat, Frederick Fairlie, in *The Woman in White* (1859). However, degeneration theory is more important in *The Law and the Lady*, which does not merely make reference to concepts from degeneration theory but questions them.

According to Nordau, "Degeneration betrays itself in certain physical characteristics, which are denominated 'stigmata,' or landmarks ... Such stigmata consist of deformities, multiple and stunted growths" (Nordau, *Degeneration*, 16-17). Nordau also

¹⁷⁴ See also William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel*. Greenslade states that the concept of degeneration "was an important resource of myth for the post-Darwinian world" (Greenslade, 1). Meanwhile, Tamara S. Wagner says that degeneration's "manifestations informed popular culture on manifold levels" even before the 1880s (Wagner, "Sports, Cruelty, and (Moral) Breakdown").

¹⁷⁵ Degeneration theory seemed to suggest that "biology is destiny": that the individual's life is determined by biological and psychological traits inherited from their forebears. The idea of "moral management" practised in most non-restraint psychiatric asylums contradicted this to some degree, because it stressed that individuals could overcome hereditary factors and physical or social constraints. For example, willpower and discipline could be used to fend off mental illness. The ideas of 'self-help' and self-control valued by the Victorian public therefore conflicted with some elements of degeneration theory.

¹⁷⁶ In *Wilkie Collins, Medicine, and the Gothic*, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas notes how Collins utilizes medical figures as a source of Gothic fear.

claims that “in almost all cases, relatives would be met who were undoubtedly degenerate” (Nordau, 17). Nordau’s understanding of degeneration builds upon Morel’s original explanation of the theory: “The clearest notion we can form of degeneracy is to regard it as a morbid deviation from an original type ... anyone bearing in him the germs becomes more and more incapable of fulfilling his functions in the world; and mental progress ... finds itself menaced also in his descendants” (Morel, *Traité des Dégénérescences*, 5).

Degeneration theory supplies a better understanding of the issues Collins explores in *The Law and the Lady* via his characterizations of Dexter and his cousin Ariel. Dexter exhibits the degenerate’s contempt for convention, has mental and physical ‘stigmata’, and undergoes a decline of both mind and body. At the beginning of the novel we learn that Dexter has an obvious physical disability, but as the novel progresses, it remains ambiguous whether this physical impairment is itself meant to suggest the presence of psychological morbidity. Throughout the majority of the novel, Dexter’s mind is not conspicuously impaired – although his emotionalism may suggest psychological instability, his thought-processes generally remain under his control.

However, in the last few chapters of the novel, Dexter’s mind suddenly deteriorates. He succumbs to what looks like a neurological ailment that either seems to be prompted by his unstable psychology, or to be the hidden cause of it. Within the space of one ‘scene’, Dexter loses many of his mental abilities. The deterioration of his mental control is first hinted at by his inability to keep his memory in order and to organize his story-telling. The process behind Dexter’s mental decline is never explicitly named. Collins’s narrative seems to present the breakdown as having a cause that is primarily organic and neurological, yet simultaneously implies that the decline was precipitated by Dexter’s uncontrolled behaviour. Modern-day readers are likely to read Dexter’s decline as resembling some form of schizophrenia.¹⁷⁷ Mid-Victorian readers, however, are likely to have interpreted his breakdown as resulting from his latent mental or physical degeneracy.

The Law and the Lady also refers (although obliquely) to the belief that one could inherit degenerative factors from one’s parents. As suggested by the quote from Morel above, this “concept of hereditary transmission” can also be traced to Morel’s 1857

¹⁷⁷ ‘Schizophrenia’ operates as an ‘umbrella’ term for a range of different symptoms. Some critics of psychiatry, and even some psychologists and psychiatrists, consider it a problematic term. John Read has stated that there is little evidence to support the idea that schizophrenia is a biological illness that arises from genetics; it may instead be a group of behaviours prompted by childhood trauma (see *Models of Madness*, ed. by John Read, L. Mosher and R. Bentall). See also Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 1-9).

Treatise (Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, 195).¹⁷⁸ In Ariel's case, degenerative factors within the family have led to her 'idiocy'. Upon her arrival at the Dexter residence, Mrs Macallan states: "This is a nice family... Dexter's cousin is the only woman in the house, and Dexter's cousin is an idiot" (*The Law and the Lady*, 203). The description of Ariel as an 'idiot' is repeated several times throughout the novel (see, for example, 211).

To the modern reader, Ariel appears to have an intellectual disability. She frequently misunderstands Valeria's intentions, she finds it difficult to follow regular speech, and she falls for the tricks Dexter plays on her. She functions at the level of a child, or even of a puppy, since her 'loyalty' and 'faithfulness' to Dexter are repeatedly stressed (347, 408).¹⁷⁹ Like Dexter, Ariel looks and acts like a member of the opposite gender. She is large, dresses in masculine clothing, is slatternly, and moves in a lumbering way.¹⁸⁰ Before they meet Ariel, Mrs Macallan warns Valeria, "you might mistake her for a man, in the dark" (203), and Valeria later describes her "rough, deep voice" (203). A further description of Ariel is given when she brushes Dexter's hair:

I could now see the girl's round, fleshy, inexpressive face, her rayless and colourless eyes, her coarse nose and heavy chin. A creature half alive; an imperfectly-developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man's pilot-jacket, and treading in a man's heavy laced boots (210).

In the late eighteenth century Johann Lavater and Phillipe Pinel had used principles of physiognomy to determine the typical appearances of various social groups. They claimed to be able to read a person's prevailing characteristics in their face and body (see Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 26-8). It was Pinel, in his *Treatise on Insanity* (1801) who first theorized ideas relating to the typical appearances of the "maniac" and the "idiot" - various forms of "madness" - versus the appearance of a "normal" person (Gilman, 28).¹⁸¹ Ariel's round and inexpressive face brings to mind Pinel's pictures of "idiots" with "moon"-like faces (see Gilman, op cit., 28), and Dexter insults Ariel's

¹⁷⁸ Later in the century 'degeneration' became less of a cultural concept, and increasingly founded on biology and physiology. The individual was placed "in a long-term history of degenerative genealogy" which encouraged a belief in "biological determinism" (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 212).

¹⁷⁹ Ariel's blind devotion to her 'master' also functions as an ironic comment on Valeria's loyalty to Eustace. Ariel's attitude toward her master is said to contain "A dog's fidelity and a woman's devotion" (347).

¹⁸⁰ Mrs Wragge, who appears in *No Name*, is the most similar character to Ariel in the rest of Collins's fiction, and like Ariel, she is mistreated by her male companion.

¹⁸¹ This 'science' was based on impressions rather than anything measurable. However, as Sander Gilman points out, when one creates any concept of the abnormal, one unavoidably restricts the idea of what is "normal" (Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 31).

appearance: “It is the face of an idiot, isn’t it?”... “Look at her! She is a mere vegetable” (211).¹⁸² Therefore, while Dexter seems to be a figure suggestive of physical, mental, and aesthetic degeneration, Ariel appears to fit perceptions of ‘the idiot’ or to exemplify the Victorian concept of ‘arrested development’: she is “imperfectly-developed” and “a creature half-alive” (210). The concepts of arrested development and idiocy are linked to the suggestion made by Morel that hereditary physical or mental deficiencies would manifest increasingly severely in succeeding generations.¹⁸³

It is interesting that Collins emphasises Ariel’s emotional life, since nineteenth-century “medical and criminological textbooks sought to exclude the idiot, the lunatic, the instinctive criminal from what would be deemed normal sensation” (Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain*, 208), claiming that they could not feel anything (Bending, 217). Dexter comments on Ariel’s inability to feel anything because she lacks nerves (*The Law and the Lady*, 327), and contrasts this with his own nervousness. However, although *The Law and the Lady* mentions these concepts, it defuses some of these attempts to pathologize Ariel; Ariel must have feelings, as she delights in hearing stories and is loving toward her ‘Master’.

Apart from Ariel, Dexter appears to be the only member of his close family who has a physical or mental disability. Dexter’s parents and brother are mentioned extremely briefly, but it seems that they conform to physical and mental norms. However, Ariel’s lack of intellect and Dexter’s congenital disability raise questions about the psychological and genetic health of Dexter’s family.¹⁸⁴ As he did in *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins here alludes to mid- century science’s investigation of the degree to which disability and madness passed through generations.

Dexter and Ariel’s degeneration are hinted at before Valeria even reaches Dexter’s house. A sense of degeneration pervades the description of the suburbs and landscape surrounding Dexter’s house:

¹⁸² From a modern perspective, it may seem troubling that the text appears to associate crossdressing or quasi-transvestism with mental ‘retardation’, or that Ariel’s deep voice might be intended to reflect intellectual disability. However, I believe that Collins is playing to stereotypes of the ‘idiot’ while also ‘troubling’ Victorian ideas about typical feminine appearance and gender conventions – as he had done in *The Woman in White*.

¹⁸³ Dexter may also be seen, like Ariel, as an example of “arrested development”. As she reads the transcript of the Trial, Valeria responds: “Never had Nature committed a more careless or cruel mistake than in the making of this man!” (173). This comment suggests that nature did not ‘finish’ its work - an idea that is not entirely misleading as it is now known that phocomelia often involves the ‘retardation’ of cell division.

¹⁸⁴ Refer to footnotes 141 and 142.

For more than an hour the carriage threaded its way through a dingy brick labyrinth of streets, growing smaller and smaller, and dirtier and dirtier, the further we went. Emerging from the labyrinth, I noticed in the gathering darkness patches of waste ground which seemed to be neither town nor country. Crossing these, we passed some forlorn outlying groups of houses ... disfigured and smoke-dried already by their journey! Darker and darker, and drearier and drearier the prospect grew (201).

The labyrinth-like streets pre-figure Valeria's later impressions of Dexter's maze-like thought and "dark" mind (214). The neighbourhood houses, "forlorn" and "disfigured" (201), and the "waste ground" and "gathering darkness" surrounding Dexter's house correlate with Dexter's gradual mental disintegration. The fact that the streets are neither in the 'town' nor in the 'country' encourages a sense of cognitive dissonance. Then, when Valeria reaches Dexter's house, she sees that it is ancient and falling apart.

The novel further implies Dexter's degeneracy by linking him to the idea of bestiality. Dexter is described as a "wild animal" (207), a "terrible creature" (207), and as a kind of frog (259).¹⁸⁵ Meanwhile, his state of mind progresses from hysteria to delirium to idiocy – an order which Jane Wood suggests was considered one of the typical progressions of degeneration (Wood, 113).¹⁸⁶

Additionally, as Valeria and Mrs Macallan pay their first visit to Dexter, statements by Mrs Macallan locate Dexter within a discourse about which forms of behaviour are "reasonable" and which are "eccentric". Mrs Macallan's statements suggest that a 'degenerate' person is likely to be "eccentric", and the novel uses her comments about Dexter and Ariel to foreground the ways that people label others or believe they can readily identify mental illness in others. Mrs Macallan is aware that Dexter purchased his decrepit house even though it has no "association" with his family. She chooses to read this as proof of Dexter's eccentricity or even of his "madness". Her conclusion is largely based on the fact that she would not personally make such a purchase. In the context of this novel, her mistake is to believe that all thought processes must be governed by simple logic that progresses according to linear associations, and that the only "sane" human decisions are practical, not dictated by emotion or instinct. *The Law and the Lady* appears to support a viewpoint that is in opposition to Mrs Macallan's beliefs. As

¹⁸⁵ The word "labyrinth" also suggests that Dexter may be a 'minotaur', especially since Dexter is presented as half man, half beast, or as half man, half machine. Additionally, Dexter is sexually frustrated, so may crave the 'sacrifice' of a young woman. He desired Sara Macallan and could not have her; he later makes a pass at Valeria.

¹⁸⁶ "In the absence of organic disease, on the other hand, visions, hallucinations, and trance-like waking dreams were frequently associated with moral or emotional derangement or seen as signs of incipient insanity" (Wood, 113).

previously mentioned, Collins announces in his “Note: Addressed to the Reader” that even if someone is sane, their thought processes are *not* always governed by “pure reason”. Sometimes the mind works irrationally, or is guided by instinct or passion.¹⁸⁷

Degeneration theory and the representation of Miserrimus Dexter in the illustrations accompanying *The Law and the Lady*’s serialization in *The Graphic* (1874-75).

In order to best demonstrate the ideological factors involved in Dexter’s degeneration, in the following section I discuss how his decline is depicted in the illustrations that accompanied the serial publication of *The Law and the Lady* in *The Graphic* newspaper. *The Law and the Lady* was serialized in *The Graphic*, a weekly periodical, from 26 September 1874 to 13 March 1875.¹⁸⁸ The novel was accompanied by over a dozen illustrations, and Miserrimus Dexter appears in six of the illustrations. These illustrations from *the Graphic* help to indicate ways that the novel both makes use of and seems to resist contemporaneous theories about degeneracy.

In “Deviance in *The Law and the Lady*” Mary Rosner suggests that the illustrations representing Miserrimus Dexter that accompanied *The Law and the Lady*’s serialization in *The Graphic* depict Dexter as undergoing a process of mental and physical degeneration before his complete breakdown and death. Rosner describes how, in the illustrations, Dexter’s appearance progressively changes in order to suggest that Dexter is an example of ‘degeneracy’. If correct, it would seem that culturally or scientifically informed Victorian readers would indeed have identified Dexter as a degenerate figure or as a figure who raises questions about degeneration. However, Rosner mentions only four of the six illustrations that feature Dexter, and does so quite briefly; meanwhile, the artist behind the illustrations is not named. In the following analysis I expand on some of these issues.

The Graphic prided itself on being packed with lavish, detailed illustrations, but despite this fact, *The Graphic* does not specifically identify *The Law and the Lady*’s illustrator on the serial’s Contents page, on a page mentioning Illustrations, or even at the beginning of the serialization itself. However, by looking at the lower left and right hand corners of the illustrations, one can identify the illustrator of almost all of the illustrations

¹⁸⁷ “Note: Addressed to the Reader” (Dated London, February 1, 1875), *The Law and the Lady*, 3.

¹⁸⁸ Serial publication of *The Law and the Lady* preceded its volume publication. The dates of its serialization may be found by looking at the serialization itself, but are also listed in David Skilton’s Penguin edition of *The Law and the Lady*, xxv.

as ‘Sydney Hall’ or ‘Sydney P. Hall.’¹⁸⁹ At the time that Sydney Hall was commissioned to create the illustrations for *The Law and the Lady* he was a relatively unknown young artist. However, he had established a growing reputation on the basis of live sketches he had made during the Franco-Prussian war, sketches that demonstrated his ability to depict dramatic action and create detailed illustrations.

The illustrations.

Figure 1: The first picture that Miserrimus Dexter appears in illustrates the scene when policemen investigate items in the room in which Sara Macallan died. In the text, the sheriff’s officer grabs Dexter’s wheelchair without asking, and unceremoniously moves Dexter out of the way by pushing him out of the room. Letters and a diary that incriminate Eustace Macallan are then found in the bedside table.

The illustration depicts how Dexter’s disability makes him powerless to impede the police search, but also focuses on Dexter’s response to the lack of respect he is shown. Forcibly moving Dexter’s wheelchair could be construed as a physical assault. Dexter *does* view it this way: he becomes enraged and yells loudly “My Chair is Me... How dare you lay hands on Me?” (145). Jenny Bourne Taylor asserts that Dexter’s exclamation pushes “physiological psychology to an absurd conclusion” (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 223). However, although the historical context of Collins’s novel was very different from our own, it is evident today that many people with disabilities *do* come to identify closely with the prostheses and other pieces of equipment they use, sometimes literally regarding such aids as parts of their body.¹⁹⁰ Dexter’s outburst therefore may accurately represent the psychology of some people with disabilities.

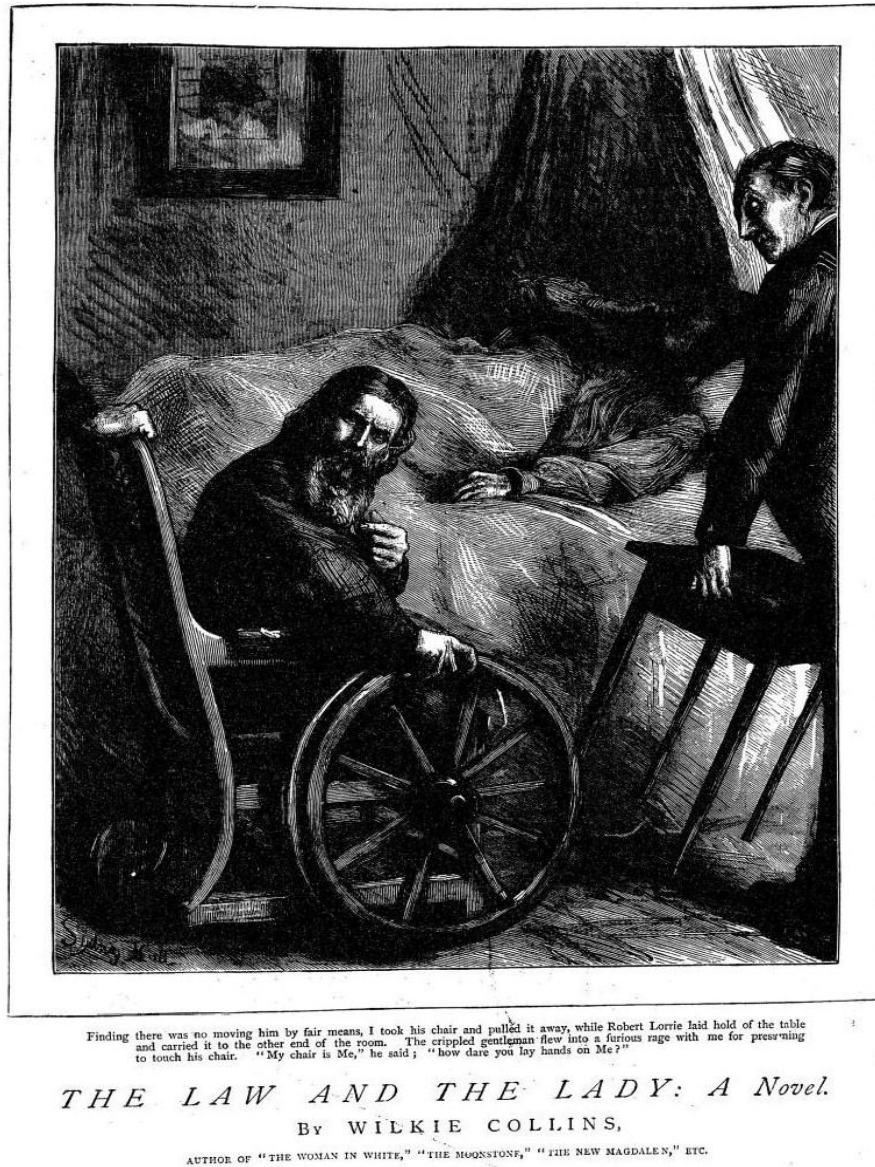
This is the only illustration in *The Graphic* that depicts Sara Macallan. *The Law and the Lady* is deliberately uncertain about Sara’s degree of physical attractiveness. This ambiguity is maintained by the illustration, since Sara is dead and her face is obscured

¹⁸⁹ Hall’s signature is discernible in every illustration of Dexter considered in my analysis (although it is sometimes difficult to find). It appears that he was the illustrator for the vast majority of the serial illustrations for *The Law and the Lady*. However, it is also clear that F.W. Lawson completed at least two of the illustrations that accompanied the serialization, since I have found Lawson’s signature in two illustrations (accompanying the instalments for 24 Oct. 1874 and 31 Oct. 1874). However, neither of these illustrations involve Dexter, and it looks as though this is the limit of Lawson’s contributions.

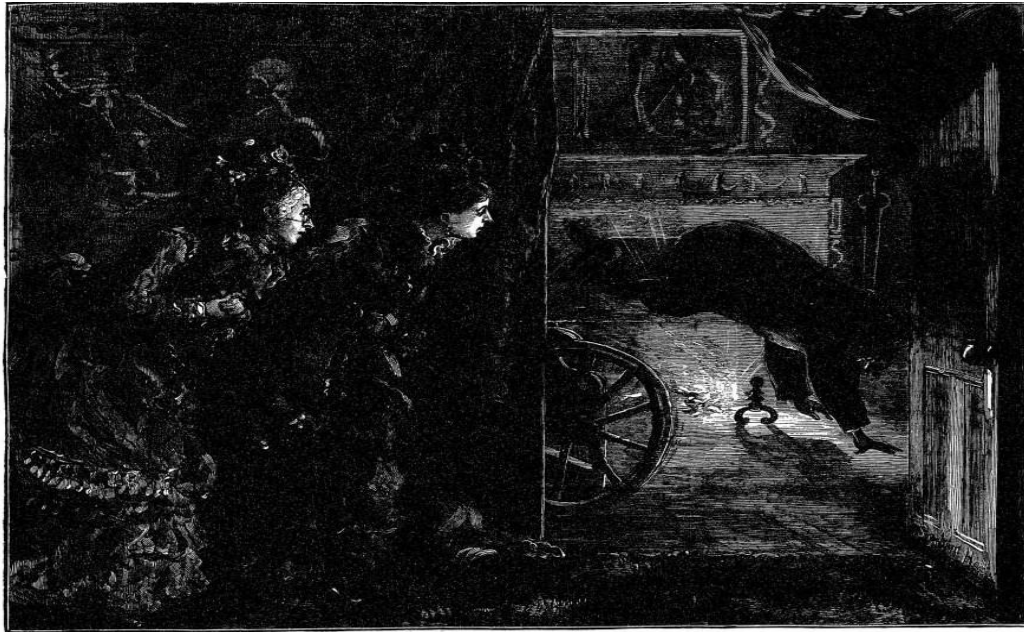
While the one volume edition produced by Chatto and Windus replicated some of the illustrations that had appeared in the novel’s serialization, it featured only seven illustrations in total, and contained illustrations by more than one illustrator. Andrew Gasson’s Wilkie Collins website lists these illustrators as S.L. Fildes, S. Hall, and F. W. Lawson (see <http://www.wilkie-collins.info/books_lawlady.htm>). The frontispiece appears to be the only illustration that was done by S.L. Fildes (aka Luke Fildes).

¹⁹⁰ See footnote 201 on page 186 for one example of such an outcome.

from the reader/viewer. The inclusion of Sara in the illustration hints at the novel's thematic links (and failed love-plot) between Miserrimus and Sara. The two characters are linked by their respective failures to live up to the 'normative' bodily standards expected by others.



(above) Figure 1: *The Graphic*, Issue 260. Saturday November 21, 1874.



The instant she pronounced those last words, "Eustace Macallan's second wife," the man in the chair sprang out of it with a shrill cry of horror, as if she had shot him. For one moment we saw a head and body in the air, absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. The moment after, the terrible creature touched the floor as lightly as a monkey on his hands.

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A Novel.

By WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "THE MOONSTONE," "THE NEW MAGDALEN," ETC.

(above) Figure 2: *The Graphic*, Issue 264. Saturday December 19, 1874.

In **Figure 2**, Valeria and Mrs Macallan visit Miserrimus Dexter in his home. The illustration depicts the exact moment when Dexter first hears mention of Valeria's connection with Sara and Eustace Macallan. Dexter leaps out of his wheelchair in fright, and scurries away into a corner, moving on his hands. Before this incident, Dexter's disability has only been mentioned via the court transcript read by Valeria. **Figure 2** depicts the first time that Valeria has met Dexter, and is the first instance of Dexter's disability being fully revealed to the readers of *The Graphic* (it is not immediately apparent from **Figure 1** that Dexter has no legs).

The moment is one of pure sensation. Both the novel's text and the illustration's caption (repeating words from the novel) stress the suddenness of Dexter's leap, and Dexter's uncanny and grotesque appearance and behaviour. Although Valeria and Mrs Macallan notice only for a split second that Dexter's body is "absolutely deprived of the lower limbs" (207), they are thoroughly shocked. The narration carries the implication that perhaps this can hardly be considered a real body at all; the illustration's caption stresses the grotesqueness of Dexter's appearance and suggests that he represents a primitive form of life: "The moment after, the *terrible creature* touched the floor as

lightly as a *monkey* on its hands” (207; emphasis added). The primary effect of Dexter’s identification with a monkey is to associate him with devolution or degeneration: he seems to have evolved backwards into an atavistic form.

However, *The Law and the Lady* is a very self-aware and self-reflexive novel. Valeria narrates this section of the novel from a position of hindsight. Because Valeria is horrified when she first sees Dexter, her description of her first meeting with him uses stigmatizing terminology. The language she uses to describe Dexter later in the novel changes as she develops her more measured and compassionate response to him.

Figure 3 (below) once more includes a depiction of Miserrimus Dexter, but the illustration does not provide much indication of his physiognomy or age, because his back is turned. However, for the third time in three illustrations, the reader is provided with a good view of Dexter’s wheelchair.

The illustration does brilliantly capture the Gothic tone of this section of the novel. It conveys the sinister nature of many of Dexter’s interests, and hints that mental disturbances may accompany his physical disability. Dexter is shown preparing a truffle for Valeria on a small stove. Above Valeria’s head, near the ceiling, is a display of plaster-cast models of the heads of famous murderers. Valeria is in a potentially threatening environment, alone with a highly eccentric man who may have killed Sara Macallan.

Perhaps more importantly, the illustration also points strongly toward the novel’s discourse about beauty, monstrosity, and disability. Valeria is shown peering towards a cabinet, in which she will find “the frightful little skeleton of a woman”. Above the skeleton a plaque reads: “*Behold the scaffolding on which beauty is built*” (emphasis mine). The illustration therefore begins to convey the novel’s observations about beauty. The plaque above the skeleton holds a grim irony, for Sara Macallan literally died in the pursuit of beauty.



The plaster casts ranged on the shelf opposite were casts taken, after death, of the heads of famous murderers. A frightful little skeleton of a woman hung in a cupboard, behind a glazed door, with this cynical inscription placed above the skull :—
 "Behold the scaffolding on which Beauty is built!"

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A Novel.

BY WILKIE COLLINS,

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(above) Figure 3: *The Graphic*, Issue 266. Saturday January 2, 1875.



(above) Figure 4: *The Graphic*, Issue 267. Saturday January 9, 1875.

Figure 4 depicts Miserrimus Dexter as a young man who has long silky blond hair. He wears luxuriant and effeminate clothing with ruffles. With the inclusion of these details the illustrator has adhered closely to textual descriptions of Dexter. Dexter's appearance is poetic and 'romantic', almost Pre-Raphaelite, or possibly even Messianic. The illustration corresponds with the scene in the novel in which Dexter plays leapfrog with his cousin Ariel, and shows several chairs fallen over on the floor. The illustration provides a visual representation of Dexter's hyper-emotional state, as he gestures histrionically; the caption accompanying this illustration states that Dexter is lost "in a fantastic Heaven of his own making". However, the illustration seems reticent in its

depiction of Dexter's disability: due to an ambiguity in Dexter's position (he is perched both on and behind a chair) the illustration does not make it explicit that Dexter has no legs.

In the background, Valeria peers through a curtain and observes Dexter, repeating the voyeurism present in **Figure 2** and emphasising the novel's juxtapositions of revelation and concealment. By depicting Valeria as a voyeur, the illustrator emphasises *The Law and the Lady*'s instances of people conducting surveillance of others.¹⁹¹ The curtain also emphasises the theatricality of the scene, and the curtain that Valeria looks around has a counterpart in the coverlid that conceals Dexter's 'deformity'.

As first pointed out by Mary Rosner, two of the illustrations accompanying *The Law and the Lady* in *The Graphic* contain 'hidden' words. The first example appears in this particular illustration: on the wall just above Dexter's head, the word "RABIES" appears in block letters. It would seem that the word "rabies" is the illustrator's own interpolation, because even though characters refer to Dexter with unflattering labels, no mention is ever made of "rabies".¹⁹² It appears that Sydney Hall chooses to attach his own 'label' to Dexter, and that rather than merely following the text's cues about Dexter's appearance and behaviour, he causes his illustration to include an *additional* observation about Dexter – one that is explicitly sensational.

Collins's text certainly creates a connection between Dexter and bestiality via the game of leapfrog and the way that other characters associate him with various animals. His labelling as rabid also reflects other characters' prejudiced fears about his influence. For example, Valeria's Uncle Benjamin tells her: "I declare to Heaven, Valeria, I believe that monster's madness is infectious – and you have caught it!" (319). Dexter's apparent "rabidity" may also refer to a sexual mania, since later in the novel he grabs Valeria and tries to kiss her. In this case the label of rabidity might reveal a fear of unbridled sexuality, or a more particular fear about the sexuality of people with disabilities.

Most significant is the connotation that Dexter is *diseased* and *contagious*. The fear that his apparent 'illnesses' may be contracted by those in close proximity parallels mid-Victorian theories that disease and filth were spread via a process of miasma. Such a fear also reflects the concerns of literary reviewers who opposed the sensation novel on moral grounds, holding that the sensation novel "worked directly on the body of the reader and

¹⁹¹ Valeria secretly witnesses Dexter's odd behaviour on at least two instances in the novel, while Dexter watches other people through keyholes, and is himself later watched in a lunatic asylum.

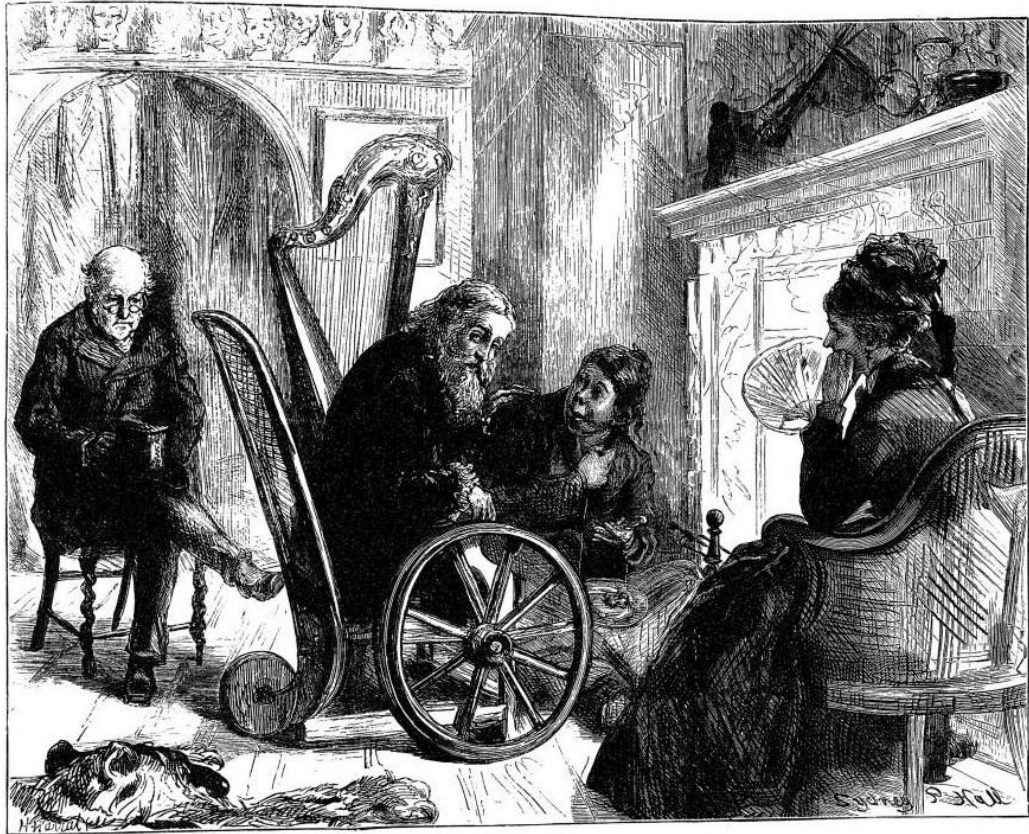
¹⁹² The only other textual reference that seems remotely linked to 'rabies' occurs when Valeria narrates: "The ears of Miserrimus Dexter must have been as sensitive as the ears of a dog" (208).

as an infection from outside, continually threatening to pollute and undermine its boundaries” (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 4). Ironically, congenital amputation and mental instability are not ‘infectious’ diseases at all, but Miserrimus Dexter’s polluting body and diseased morality parallel the place of sensation fiction in Victorian society. Dexter is seen as a potentially corrupting presence; most specifically, as a threat to the thought processes and values of Valeria, who, like many female readers, is *a middle-class housewife*.

In **Figure 5** (below) Valeria visits Dexter once more, while she is attended by her Uncle Benjamin. Dexter and his cousin Ariel appear in the centre of the illustration. Ariel’s round face represents what Pinel and other physicians considered the typical physiognomy of the intellectually deficient (as mentioned earlier in this chapter).

Sydney Hall appears to have followed the directive of the novel and to have begun depicting Dexter’s decline. Dexter’s lack of vigour is observable in comparison with **Figure 4**, and he matches Valeria’s description of him (located slightly earlier in the novel) as looking “pinched and worn”, like “a doomed man” (329). Although Dexter is disabled, he remains Ariel’s master, and Ariel begs him to tell her a story. The caption accompanying the illustration reads: “Master! You haven’t told me a story for ever so long. Puzzle my thick head, Make my flesh creep.” The illustration depicts the moment when Dexter is about to begin narrating the story, but suddenly becomes bewildered (332-33), signalling his approaching collapse.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ The illustration also represents Dexter and Ariel sitting in front of a harp, although Dexter does not actually play the harp in this particular scene (he played it during one of Valeria’s previous visits). The presence of the harp may allude to the Biblical story in which David soothes King Saul’s madness and violent temper by playing music on a harp (this story occurs in 1 Samuel, chapter 16). Musical therapy was also used as a calming measure in insane asylums. While the harp functions partly as an artistic outlet for Dexter, and to signify his flamboyance, it also appears that Dexter plays in order to soothe his brain (*The Law and the Lady*, 218). In the modern Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel the collapse occurs only fourteen pages later (346).



"Master!" she cried, "Master! you haven't told me a story for ever so long. Puzzle my thick head. Make my flesh creep. Come on. A good long story."

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A Novel.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "THE MOONSTONE," "THE NEW MAGDALEN," ETC.

(above) Figure 5: *The Graphic*, Issue 271. Saturday February 6, 1875.



Ariel had been beforehand with me. She had raised her master in the chair; she had got one arm round him. In her free hand she brandished an Indian club, torn from a "trophy" of Oriental weapons that ornamented the wall over the fireplace.

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A Novel.
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(above) Figure 6: *The Graphic*, Issue 272. Saturday February 13, 1875.

Figure 6 depicts Dexter succumbing to a complete mental breakdown. In the text, Dexter is described as suddenly stopping in the middle of his story-telling, laughing and sobbing, then looking up to the ceiling with a senseless grin. In the illustration, Dexter suddenly looks mentally absent and much older. Lines have appeared in his face, and his hair appears to be greying. This depiction is faithful to the text, and reflects Victorian theories about how physiognomy revealed aspects of one's mind, character, and experience.¹⁹⁴ Ariel notices Dexter's vacancy and becomes enraged. Blaming Valeria and Benjamin for taxing Dexter's energies, she threatens to attack them with a club.

¹⁹⁴ The novel seems to suggest that Dexter's degeneration is brought on via a mixture of emotional excesses, his status as an artist, his aristocratic breeding, and due to the inextricability of body and mind. The first two factors are in line with explanations for degeneration later supplied by Max Nordau.

Figure 6 again hints at further meanings via the appearance of the word “IMBECILE” directly above Dexter’s head (written in capital letters). The subject of the ‘hidden’ sign seems ambiguous given that up until this point in the novel, *Ariel* is the only character who has been described as anything like ‘imbecilic’. To a modern reader, Ariel appears to have evolved backwards to the status of cave-woman waving a club; Victorian readers may have responded more to the anger and wildness she displays in this illustration. Yet the sign is placed directly above *Dexter’s* head. Dexter begins the novel as a highly intelligent man, but at this point in the novel there is irony in the fact that Dexter, who previously teased Ariel about her idiocy, now operates at a lower mental level than Ariel, who defends him.¹⁹⁵

Once again, the word inserted into the illustration is provocative and uses terminology that has not yet appeared in the novel. Later in the novel, *after* Dexter is placed in an asylum, a doctor informs Valeria that Dexter “is in a state of absolute imbecility” (350). It appears that Sydney Hall extracted the idea of imbecility from this later scene, but transposed it to an earlier moment.

Modern-day readers also encounter an interpretive dilemma regarding the difficulty of knowing whether the labels of “imbecile” and “rabies” are likely to correspond to how most Victorian readers would have regarded Dexter, or whether they would have been guided by such labels. It is difficult to interpret whether the signs should be viewed as amusing or facetious, whether they are intended to refer to the unfairness of derogatory labelling, or whether they actually put forward prejudiced views of the disabled.

The signs are also reminiscent of the hyperbolic language used to advertise Victorian freak shows.¹⁹⁶ Hall may have noticed the novel’s use of the freak show metaphor and incorporated it in his illustrations; he may also have expected that *The Graphic’s* readership would understand these melodramatic signs to inherently contain suggestions of their own inappropriateness, ambiguity, or irony. While the novel *does* seem to suggest a link between Dexter and the denizens of the freak show, it also suggests that there are problems associated with viewing him in this way.

¹⁹⁵ Ariel’s attempt to defend Dexter is a replication of Valeria’s own attempt to create a legal ‘defence’ for her own weak and ineffectual husband, Eustace.

¹⁹⁶ Mary Rosner and Teresa Mangum have both noticed this possible connection. Mangum notices a more general connection between Dexter and the idea of the ‘freak’, while Rosner reprints an illustration entitled “The Deformito-mania” which originally appeared in *Punch*. I have found two citations for this illustration: Rosner lists *Punch* 3 (1848), 90; see Rosner, 10. I have also seen this illustration cited under *Punch* 13 (1847). This illustration features advertisements for “The Egyptian Hall of Ugliness”, “The Greatest Deformity in the World”, and “The Ne Plus Ultra of Hideousness”. It is also reproduced in a section entitled “Entertainment: Freak Shows and Side Shows” on the website <www.victorianlondon.org>.

However, there is another facet to this mystery. After having given this question much thought, and examining other illustrations from the serialization, I finally realized that these ‘signs’ are actually the titles written on Miserrimus Dexter’s artworks, which hang on the wall. While the artworks themselves are not very visible, the inscriptions on them are, as are parts of the picture frames, and a ‘sign’ appears in another illustration that does not feature Dexter. In the illustration by Hall (not pictured here) that accompanies the instalment for December 12, 1874 (Issue 263), only Ariel, Mrs Macallan, and Valeria appear. A sign behind Valeria reads “CRUELTY”; it is apparent that it is a label attached to a piece of art. It seems very likely, therefore, that the other ‘signs’ I have mentioned also represent titles of Dexter’s artworks or words written on them. What is unusual is that while “Rabies” and “Imbecile” do seem to have possible connections to Dexter, it is difficult to see any connection between Valeria and “Cruelty”. Moreover, if these labels do refer to Dexter’s “Illustrations of the Passions”, “Cruelty” is the only word appearing in these illustrations that seems to match with any of the painting or sketch titles actually given in the text (see *The Law and the Lady*, 229).

Also unknown is whether Hall was instructed by Collins to include these labels. Collins was often closely involved in planning the publication of his novels, and he wrote to *The Graphic* angrily when they censored part of this novel.¹⁹⁷ However, in this instance there are no records suggesting that Collins provided instructions for illustrations or saw the illustrations before publication. On the other hand, neither is there any indication that he later complained about how the novel was illustrated.¹⁹⁸ It is also difficult to know whether *The Graphic* would have felt any particular responsibility about the representation of characters with disabilities.

As Ira B. Nadel suggests, illustrations are “complementary forms of writing” that can affect a reader’s emotional and intellectual involvement with a text (Nadel, “Wilkie Collins and His Illustrators”, 150). Illustrations offer a “gateway” into the novel and

¹⁹⁷ During the serialization of *The Law and the Lady* a serious legal argument erupted between Collins and the management of *The Graphic*. *The Graphic*, ignoring a previous agreement with Collins, censored the paragraph of Collins’s manuscript in which Dexter makes a pass at Valeria. Collins forced *The Graphic* to restore the passage. *The Graphic* was clearly not averse to ignoring the wishes of their authors. However, this incident suggests that Collins was likely to have complained loudly had the illustrations for the novel not met with his approval.

¹⁹⁸ I have not been able to locate any information about whether Collins was involved with the planning of the illustrations for *The Law and the Lady*, or if he wished Sydney Hall to be the main illustrator for the novel. However, Collins was sometimes closely engaged with the planning for how his novels were to be edited, published, and promoted, so it is possible the illustrations were run past him before publication. There is an instance on record of Collins requesting that a Pre-Raphaelite artist illustrate “Mr Wray’s Cash Box”, and he later corrected the caption for the frontispiece of this story (Nadel, “Wilkie Collins and His Illustrators”, 151-52).

there may be a danger in illustrations that offer meanings and perspectives that compete with those present “in the original text” (Nadel, *ibid.*, 151).¹⁹⁹ The general tendency of illustrators of mid-Victorian novels was to adhere closely to details included in a novel, or to the spirit of a novel (Nadel, *ibid.*, 150).

The implication that Dexter is rabid and imbecilic therefore initially seems inexplicable and incongruous given that the final tenor of *The Law and the Lady* is to argue *against* the negative stereotyping and disenfranchisement of the disabled. But the text of *The Law and the Lady* adopts various responses to Dexter’s disability and focuses on the difficulty of properly interpreting signs and clues (see Jenny Bourne Taylor, “Introduction”, *The Law and the Lady*, xiii). It is therefore probable that the signs appearing in the illustrations of Dexter are also intended to suggest multiple interpretations of Dexter’s disabilities, complementing and replicating the self-reflexivity of Collins’s text by stressing the anxieties and difficulties of interpretation.

The difficulty with interpreting these signs also correlates with the fact that while acting as a detective, Valeria’s path to the truth is “strewn with false clues and misleading signs” that she must learn to correctly interpret (Taylor, “Introduction”, *The Law and the Lady*, xiii). This process is also demanded of the novel’s reader (Taylor, *ibid.*, xvii). The ambiguity of the signs suits a novel in which statements by some characters are exposed as misrepresentations, lies, or as reflecting only one version of the ‘truth’. The narrative relies on doubled characters, fragments, mirrors, and distorted views of the self, and questions the ability of various characters to maintain a single, stable identity - Valeria signs her name incorrectly in the marriage register (8), Sara Macallan commits suicide, Dexter undergoes a breakdown.

Hall’s signs appear to be deliberately provocative, but Collins’s novel also seems to recognize the power of pejorative labelling and fear-mongering. As Sander Gilman points out in *Disease and Representation*, how people respond to the disabled is often guided by ‘texts’ they have encountered and terminology they have inherited from personal encounters with illness and disability. Literature and other media therefore hold very powerful positions from which to either encourage or discourage the perpetuation of derogatory labelling and inaccurate stereotypes (see Gilman, 6-7).

Gilman also explains that when the mentally ill are depicted in scientific and artistic literature, the questions raised usually relate to social control of the mentally ill person,

¹⁹⁹ Nadel explains further: “An illustration is a sign encoding cultural and narrative values embedded in the language of the text” (Nadel, “Wilkie Collins and His Illustrators”, 150). See also Clare Douglass on illustrations for and imagery within Collins’s novels (Douglass, “Text and Image Together”).

whether they will become violent and unpredictable (Gilman, 3), and whether the person needs to be institutionalised, imprisoned, or medicated. Throughout history, insanity and violence have been “wrongfully equated” (Gilman, 9); mental health professionals propagate this myth because if mental illness is perceived to be “easily identifiable”, then society can imagine there is a great distance between the mentally ill and the mentally well. Gilman contradicts this dichotomy, stating that in reality, mental illness is common and pervasive and that there is no huge gap between the psychology and behaviour of the mentally ill and the mentally well (Gilman, 13). It is the presence or absence of just such a boundary that we see Collins investigating in *The Law and the Lady*.

‘Performance’.

One aspect of Miserrimus Dexter’s characterization that the majority of critics have failed to fully explore is the theatrical, deliberately ‘performed’ aspects of Dexter’s disability and personality. Dexter’s interest in ‘performing’ seems to be influenced by his disability, coming from both a need to convince others of his disability and a wish to compensate for it. Teresa Mangum suggests that Dexter is an “exhibitionist”, not merely in the sense that he is playful and extroverted, but in a sense that connotes sexual deviance: “Exhibitionism is today defined as a disorder which depends on self-display and which is heightened when the viewer, usually either a woman or a child, expresses fear or shock at the visible” (Mangum, “Wilkie Collins, Detection and Deformity”, 292). Mangum argues that Dexter deliberately enacts shocking scenes of self-display.

Mangum’s suggestion is interesting, but not completely accurate. Preparing for one visit to Dexter, Valeria *does* seem to identify Dexter as an exhibitionist, as she asks: “What new piece of eccentricity was he about to exhibit?” Yet Dexter exhibits only his odd habits and interests, rather than his physical deformities or any unusual sexual behaviour (*The Law and the Lady*, 233). Moreover, much of Dexter’s odd behaviour witnessed by Valeria cannot be construed as deliberate exhibitionism, as Dexter does not always realise that Valeria is watching. At one point in the novel Dexter shows up unexpectedly at Uncle Benjamin’s house. During this visit Dexter has no coverlid and his ‘deformity’ is revealed – “nothing was sacrificed to conventional ideas of propriety” (292) – yet it is not clear that the coverlid has been left behind on purpose. Dexter’s use of the coverlid at other times and his tendency to hide in his own home suggest that he is more interested in hiding his ‘deformity’ than in exhibiting it.

But Dexter does deliberately call attention to his disability while testifying at Eustace's murder trial. At this juncture Dexter shows great awareness of his 'audience' and attempts to gain their sympathy. He does not, however, reveal his body to those in the court. Instead, he stresses the "unhappiness" that his parents assumed would accompany his disability (173-74). Toward the end of the novel, Dexter makes deliberate attempts to solicit sympathy from Valeria, playing up his inabilities and his depression. At these moments, he consciously 'acts' his disability. But this behaviour is prompted by his romantic interest in Valeria and his realization that the best way to hold her attention is by gaining her sympathy. Moreover, Dexter does not always deliberately exaggerate his disabilities: his disabilities become worse throughout the novel and evade his control.

Although it may be inappropriate to apply the modern sexual meaning of "exhibitionist" to Dexter, *The Law and the Lady* certainly utilizes a theatrical trope in its representation of him, and Dexter has a sense of the theatricality that he can attach to his disability.²⁰⁰ He assumes the roles of Shakespeare, Byron, Lord Nelson, and expert truffle chef, compensating for his disability by imagining himself as a powerful figure. He both reveals and overcomes his disability as he plays leapfrog, since this activity displays the strength of his upper body and hands. When Valeria first witnesses Dexter's play-acting, she stands in a recess that is curtained off by a tapestry (206). As Valeria and Mrs Macallan hide in the recessed area, they peer through an open doorway and spy on Dexter as he rolls around a room on his wheelchair. This creates a theatrical tableau in which Dexter is 'discovered' by looking through curtains and a doorway into another room: he is framed as an actor in a 'discovery space' would be (205-6).

After this visit to Dexter, Mrs Macallan remarks that Dexter "has made a good show" (218), and chapter headings in the novel describe Valeria's calling on Dexter not as a "visit" or an "interview", but as a "*view*" of Dexter (see chapter titles XXIV, "First View" and chapter XXV "Second View"). This suggests that Dexter is observed either as a theatrical act, as an animal in a zoo, as a sideshow exhibit, a scientific specimen, or in a similar way to how lunatics were viewed at Bedlam. Even the narrative of the murder mystery is presented theatrically. When Valeria starts reading the trial transcript, she finds that it lists the judges and attorneys who took part in the trial, as though they are actors in a play: "The next page ... enumerated the actors in the Judicial Drama" (124).

²⁰⁰ One early reviewer of *The Law and the Lady* read Dexter as a parody of the Victorian puppet show character Punch (of "Punch and Judy"). Walter Maclean of *The Academy* claimed that early versions of the 'Punch' character had no legs, [presumably because he is a puppet] and that Punch had "a mania for homicide" and "a faithful dumb attendant" (see Mangum, 8).

Dexter suggests that his theatricality is often forced upon him by his inner compulsions. He tells Valeria that his acting the parts of famous men is non-voluntary: he feels “compelled” to do so by his “overexcited brain” (218). He claims that this imagination becomes uncontrollable (218). He then enters a “frenzy” in which he “reanimate[s]” “the spirits of the departed great”: “My brains are boiling in my head” (204). Dexter believes that this frenzy must be expressed so that it can wear itself out; if an observer interferes, the frenzy may become worse (204).²⁰¹ From Dexter’s point of view, his acting and his manic behaviour are physiological and psychological necessities; without such expression, he would go mad (218).

There is another possible reason behind Dexter’s melodramatic performance of disability. As Martha Stoddard Holmes has explained, during the Victorian period, disabled people often had to display their disability convincingly, otherwise they would be denied financial help. The Victorian public were sceptical about many claims of disability, so the disabled poor often had to appear to be obviously disabled, in conspicuous pain, or to tell convincing stories about their disability if they wished to successfully apply for alms. Workhouses required applicants to pass rigorous proofs of their disability; if such requirements were not met, applicants would be rejected as malingerers (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 186).

The material and practical aspects of Dexter’s physical disability.

Another facet missing from previous critical discussions of Dexter is how physical disability affects Dexter in practical or social terms, or how the representation of his physical and mental disabilities brings up issues related to mind-body interaction. Despite the sensational aspects of Dexter’s physical disability, Collins still depicts the practical and psychological effects of Dexter’s limb malformation in a realistic fashion. During the trial transcript we are given an indication that Dexter identifies very closely with his wheelchair. Dexter views the chair as an extension of his body; the wheelchair has *become* the equivalent of Dexter’s legs: this is demonstrated when the sheriff’s assistant attempts to pull on Dexter’s chair and push it out of the room and Dexter angrily responds: “My chair is Me ... How dare you lay hands on Me?” (145).

²⁰¹ Dexter’s falling into an unstoppable frenzy sounds similar to suffering from an epileptic fit: his system becomes overwrought, and he can no longer control the movements of his body. Compare *Poor Miss Finch*, 93, which suggests that Oscar’s fit may have been caused by the accumulation of unreleased tension. The doctor witnessing Oscar’s fit stresses that Oscar must be left untouched while the fit wears itself out. Dexter describes his acting in the same way (218); this could suggest that it is prompted by psychological compulsions, by neurological damage, or by both of these.

Such realistic details add depth and perception to Collins's portrayal of Dexter. It seems likely that an amputee *would* in fact begin to perceive a prosthesis that is designed to do the job of a natural limb as actually 'being' a natural limb or being part of their body. This is a fraught area in some forms of disability theory, but some writings suggest that identification with a prosthesis indicates a positive acceptance of the disability, or that accepting the prosthesis may help an individual maintain a sense of bodily or psychic integrity. This could be preferable to harbouring a dislike for the prosthesis or aid, or to having a sense of distance from it. On the other hand, as we have seen in the case of Deaf culture, sometimes a disabled person may regard a prosthesis as an unwanted imposition, as something unnatural. When I state that this detail about Dexter is 'realistic', therefore, I mean that it is within the bounds of responses to wheelchair use that one might expect from a wheelchair user. While Dexter's response is an individual one, it is a form of response that has been documented in a (modern) study of congenital amputation.²⁰² Even if no such medical study, memoir, or anecdotal information about wheelchair use was available to Collins, Collins still clearly tries to add substance and verisimilitude to his representation of Dexter by imagining what psychological effect congenital amputation might have on a person.

It seems that by regarding the wheelchair as part of his body and valuing the wheelchair, Dexter helps himself avoid negative feelings about his disability. The wheelchair adds to his sense of self-worth because it adds to his mobility. By suggesting that touching the wheelchair violates the integrity of his body, Dexter signals the importance of his body and his dignity: he should not be touched without his permission, and people should respect his personal space – disability is not an invitation to ignore boundaries. The sheriff's assistant acts as though he can shift Dexter out of the room without asking, and seems to view the chair as merely an accessory. Here, Collins suggests the need for the able-bodied to become more aware of the feelings of the disabled.

Collins also attempts to explore how Dexter's physical disability impacts on his emotional and mental health. While Collins never falls directly into the trap of simply suggesting that Dexter's physical disability has *led to* or *caused* Dexter's emotional and mental difficulties, he does suggest that the physical disability has exacerbated Dexter's

²⁰² See Gelya Frank's "On Embodiment: A Case Study of Congenital Limb Deficiency in American Culture", in which Frank discusses the experiences of a young woman called Diane who does not have normative arms and legs, but rather "stumps". At one point, Frank writes: "She has referred to the battery for her electric wheelchair as 'my legs' and to the mobility she gains in her wheelchair as 'walking'" (Frank, 51).

emotional problems and that Dexter's feelings about his disability – and his social isolation and stigmatization - accelerate the decay in his stability. It remains unclear whether the novel suggests that Dexter would have become mentally unstable regardless of whether he had been born with a physical 'defect'. Perhaps this uncertainty is an essential part of the novel's message. What Collins certainly *does* suggest is that Dexter is bitter because he perceives his physical disability as having precluded him from having success with women.

The area where Dexter's legs would be, if he had normative legs, is typically covered by a "cover-lid". It is implied that this is used to avoid alarming the public, but also so that Dexter can avoid receiving insults. Although the coverlid may imply that Dexter feels shame about his disability, its main implication seems to be that Dexter realizes he is expected to hide his disability from the world. However, *The Law and the Lady* does not allow Dexter's physical disability to remain decorously covered. Other characters in the novel are forced to look directly at Dexter's 'deformity', because the cover-lid occasionally slips down or is absent. The novel also repeatedly mentions Dexter's lack of lower limbs, even when not specifically encouraging a visualization of this lack.²⁰³ The text never forgets about his disability and never makes it disappear; nor does Collins use euphemisms or vague suggestions to refer to the extent of Dexter's disability. Yet the text also avoids making physical disability the *only* feature that characterizes Dexter.

While Dexter sometimes laments his physical disability in melodramatic terms and other characters refer to it as a "deformity", Collins does not seem to take this attitude towards the disability. Additionally, while Dexter sometimes appears comic, he is accorded some dignity: Dexter has artistic talents and has not given up on life. While we sometimes witness Dexter lamenting his position, at other times he seems proud of his degree of physical prowess, telling Valeria, "I'm pretty active, Mrs Valeria, considering I'm a cripple" (259). He retains pride in his appearance and his intelligence.

It is also made apparent that Dexter has either been rejected or ignored by his family. His parents responded negatively to his disability at his birth, and chose to exacerbate its effect by awarding him a stigmatizing name (172-73). Dexter's brother never shows an interest in him until the novel's end, when Dexter must be sent to the asylum. Dexter lives entirely alone, apart from the companionship of Ariel, who also seems to have been abandoned by the family. It is obvious that whenever Dexter goes out in public he is

²⁰³ Referring back to the serialized illustrations in *The Graphic*, one can also see that at least one illustration (my **Figure 2**) made the full extent of Dexter's disability very apparent.

made aware of his difference. *The Law and the Lady* attempts to show how such rejection and loneliness would affect a person: it would undoubtedly create depression and leave the isolated person reliant on their imagination for entertainment, company, and emotional compensation. Dexter's isolation virtually guarantees that he will seem eccentric to those in mainstream society.

Collins's novel also reveals the bitterness that Dexter feels about his disability and his rejection by others via the violent imagery in his artwork. The reader cannot really blame Dexter for this anger, but on the other hand, the novel discourages us from adopting an attitude of pity toward Dexter, partly by describing his extraordinary and often unpleasant behaviour. Instead, it is implicit that even if readers are unsettled by Dexter, they are expected to adopt Valeria's viewpoint toward Dexter: one of sympathy and tolerance – perhaps even a stronger position of *empathy* and respect. This is preferable to feeling pity or sympathy, because pity and sympathy require the person feeling these emotions to view themselves as superior to the person they are observing.

While Dexter is unpredictable, he does not turn out to be 'infectious' or especially dangerous, and given that *The Law and the Lady* stresses Dexter's symbolic connections with Valeria and presents him as human being rather than only as a freak, I find that the novel ultimately presents Dexter in a fashion that is multi-faceted, sympathetic, and that encourages empathy.

Issues of 'madness' and 'insanity'.

In this subsection I shall discuss forms of psychiatric and psychological knowledge through which readers now, and readers in the Victorian period, could read Dexter. These include such psychological and psychiatric concepts as nervous disorder, monomania, hysteria, sadism, and schizophrenia. For modern readers, it may be of particular use to draw an analogy between the Victorians' conceptions of mental 'degeneration' and the ideas that members of the public hold regarding the modern-day psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia. For the Victorians, 'degeneration' encompassed many cultural meanings, not all of which can be evoked by contemporary concepts of mental illness. Degeneration theory included judgments about cultural values and personal morality as well as about mental processes. Dexter appears to be a prototypical 'degenerate' figure, both because he appears to fall victim to a neurological illness, and in terms of his morality. The modern psychiatric diagnosis of 'schizophrenia' is actually of very recent conception, and is regarded by some amongst the mental health profession

as a fairly controversial diagnosis. In a practical sense it is an umbrella term for various mental disturbances and the symptoms of such. Yet the psychiatric concept of schizophrenia may be one of the few concepts we have today that that in any way comes close to evoking the sense of atrophy or disorganisation suggested by mental ‘degeneration’.²⁰⁴

In *Disease and Representation* Sander Gilman discusses the evolution of schizophrenia as a psychiatric concept. He explains that schizophrenia is one of the most recently discovered and most undefined mental illnesses; it has become a catch-all name for a wide variety of symptoms and behaviours (Gilman, 9). Perusal of the *DSM-IV* suggests that Gilman’s assessment is correct, as the *DSM-IV* states that schizophrenia has different subsections and types.²⁰⁵ Other public and academic sources acknowledge that there is no “typical” case of schizophrenia, or that there is “difficulty in detecting a consistent ‘neuropsychological signature’ of schizophrenia” (Blanchard & Neale, “The Neuropsychological Signature of Schizophrenia”, n.p.; qtd. in O’Carroll, “Cognitive Impairment in Schizophrenia”, 164).²⁰⁶ Public confusion over what schizophrenia involves may partially explain why the behaviours exhibited by Dexter have been variously described by modern literary critics as “schizophrenic”, “hysteric”, and “manic”.

Of most relevance to *The Law and the Lady* is Gilman’s suggestion that schizophrenia is frightful to observers because it suggests that a mind is capable of acting against itself: “The fact that we could disintegrate mentally by way of natural processes ... is a monstrous, uncanny concept” (Bleuler, “What Is Schizophrenia”, 8; qtd. in Gilman, 1). This insight proves useful when considering other characters’ condemnatory responses toward Dexter’s behaviour and mental health, and the novel’s allusions to fears that social values are falling apart.²⁰⁷ Toward the end of the novel, needing vital information

²⁰⁴ There are also other forms of organic brain disease that cause atrophy of the brain. It is possible that the reader is simply meant to read Dexter as suffering from a very generalized form of organic brain disease – or simply from a vague form of ‘degeneration’.

²⁰⁵ “Schizophrenia” is described in “Chapter 5: Schizophrenia and other Psychotic Disorders” of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (commonly known as the *DSM-IV*). This chapter discusses Schizophrenia, along with related disorders such as Schizophreniform Disorder, Schizoaffective Disorder, Delusional Disorder, Brief Psychotic Disorder, Psychotic Disorder Due to a General Medical Condition, Substance-Induced Psychotic Disorder, Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, and Folie à Deux. These are not considered to be *the same as* schizophrenia, but to be psychotic disorders that share similarities with it (see *DSM-IV*, 273-274). Meanwhile, the *DSM-IV* also lists various ‘subtypes’ of schizophrenia (*DSM-IV*, 278), and even, in its introduction to the topic, states that the definition of schizophrenia that appeared in the previous edition of the *DSM* was too broad (*DSM-IV*, 273-274).

²⁰⁶ See also <<http://www.schizophrenia.com/earlysigns.htm>>.

²⁰⁷ Gilman’s book is also of interest for its discussion of the murder scandal that surrounded the Victorian painter Richard Dadd, discussed earlier.

from Dexter, Valeria becomes concerned that his mind might shut down completely before she is able to persuade or trick him into betraying the information. Her anxiety increases as she witnesses Dexter's deterioration. While the deterioration is in itself disturbing, it may also remind Valeria that her own state of mind could be precarious.

Valeria's susceptibility to nervous suffering is frequently referred to throughout *The Law and the Lady's* first hundred and twenty pages. Early in the novel, Valeria wakes up with an "all-pervading sense of nervous uneasiness" (23), and soon after this, a meeting with her mother-in-law leaves her in a "fever of expectation" (30). Later, after having caught Eustace out in a lie, Valeria states "My mind is in a bad way" (48). When she is told by Major Fitz-David that there is a secret about her husband, her body instantly responds: "My head began to swim, my heart throbbed violently. I tried to speak; it was in vain; the effort almost choked me" (73). Major Fitz-David warns Valeria that she should not seek out the truth unless her nerves are tough enough to sustain a terrible shock (75). Apparently, at first Valeria does *not* possess a strong constitution: when she discovers that Eustace was previously married, "I felt as if my reason was giving way" (90). The news worsens as Valeria discovers that Eustace was on trial for murder, and she swoons (94). Soon afterwards, she awakens "in agonizing pain" (94), and, noticing her doctor's concern, realises "My fainting fit must have presented symptoms far more serious than the fainting fits of women in general" (96). Despite being highly strung, however, Valeria is also strong and valorous, and tries to defy her tendency toward nervousness. Her constitution and behaviour are considered unusual for a woman,²⁰⁸ and this is part of the reason why various friends and family try to undermine her determination to overturn the "Not Proven" verdict, labelling her as "crazy" for attempting such an objective.

The implication that the nervous but "sane" Valeria might also lose her reason, or that she may be deluded in her quest, blurs the line between mental health and illness and hints that psychiatric diagnosis and labelling has much to do with society's perceptions, values, and discourses. The position Valeria is placed in, of being engaged in a seemingly monomaniacal quest driven by her compulsive passion for her husband, also symbolically links her to Dexter, who most of her acquaintances *do* regard as "insane".

It is likely that today Dexter might be diagnosed as displaying manic-depressive or bipolar behaviour. But his difficulties are not purely behavioural; the deterioration of his

²⁰⁸ The name Valeria, as Dexter notes, sounds Roman (211). Jenny Bourne Taylor notes that it is a Latin name, with connotations "of strength and resolution" ("Explanatory Notes", *The Law and the Lady*, note 7, 418).

memory suggests there is also a neurological basis to his condition, which would bear more resemblance to schizophrenia. The Victorians may not have been able to understand any neurological basis for Dexter's deterioration apart from considering him in the light of degeneration. However, I also wish to read Dexter through some other psychiatric paradigms that were available to the Victorian public. My belief is that Collins deliberately leaves Dexter's disorder unspecified and represents a fairly large range of symptomatology in order to make use of, and to some extent *counter*, various psychiatric or medical discourses about a range of disorders.

One discourse that immediately appears upon Valeria's first visit to Dexter relates to the concept of 'Monomania'. The mental illness that came to be known as monomania was first identified by Phillipe Pinel, and was a part of his theory of "*manie sans delire*" or "partial insanity". The term "monomania" was later introduced by Jean-Étienne Esquirol, to refer to a form of insanity in which the patient did not suffer from delirium or hallucinations. The person afflicted was generally lucid and sensible and could make everyday decisions. However, they appeared to be obsessed by one particular topic (O'Neill, "Why Then Ile Fit You", 148).²⁰⁹

The concept of monomania was still influential during the Victorian period, with various Victorian psychologists holding that unhealthy physical action or unhealthy thinking could result in mental pathology if repeated often enough (see Vrettos, "Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition", 400, and Mangham, "How Do I Look?", 84). Monomania was generally considered to have developed due to the subject's persistent dwelling on one idea, or due to the repetition of certain actions. Travelling "the same channels, mentally and literally, day after day" would cause one to be caught in those channels (Mangham, *ibid.*, 84-85).²¹⁰

As Valeria and Mrs Macallan enter Dexter's house, Ariel shows them a notice that Dexter has written, which vehemently warns visitors not to interrupt Dexter while he is thinking or creating:

NOTICE: - My immense imagination is at work. Visions of heroes unroll themselves before me. I re-animate in myself the spirits of the departed great.

²⁰⁹ Mid-Victorian novels usually depict monomania as an unwarranted, or repetitive and unhealthy preoccupation with one topic or with one obsessive thought. Two examples of monomaniacal characters are Bradley Headstone of *Our Mutual Friend* and Louis Trevelyan of Anthony Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right*. In *Our Mutual Friend* Headstone is preoccupied with the idea that people will find out about his low birth, or that they are insulting his low birth. This is soon shown to be an indication of a deeper psychosis. In *He Knew He Was Right*, Louis Trevelyan lets his unfounded suspicion of his wife's infidelity destroy his life.

²¹⁰ Of course, this now sounds similar to 'obsessive-compulsive disorder'.

My brains are boiling in my head. Any persons who disturb me, under present circumstances, do it at the peril of their lives.-
DEXTER (204).

The notice immediately provides an indication of Dexter's mental imbalance, and a monomaniacal obsession with great military figures and literary superstars. It suggests that Dexter imagines himself to be a visionary poet; he also situates himself as a powerful Shakespeare-like figure and a great actor.²¹¹ Jenny Bourne Taylor reads Dexter's obsessions with "great" people and with Sara Macallan as indications that he suffers from monomania ("Explanatory Notes", *The Law and the Lady*, 427).²¹² In the text, Mrs Macallan views the notice as proof of Dexter's insanity.

However, Dexter also exhibits symptoms that can be read as indicating 'hysteria', a "psychosomatic disease" (Wood, *Passion and Pathology*, 8) that involved "psychological states manifesting as bodily symptoms". Hysteria was thought of as a female-oriented disease, and it became a "catch-all" diagnosis that could be applied to almost any female behaviour deemed rebellious or inappropriate. Sexuality and gender-appropriate ('orthodox' male and female) behaviour were the issues particularly at stake (Wood, 13). Dexter displays inappropriate sexual feelings and behaviour when it is revealed that he loved Sara Macallan and when he lunges at Valeria. His flights of fancy, periods of delirium, manic games of leapfrog, wheelchair racing, and loud play-acting may also fit under this rubric. Dexter's implied association with this illness correlates with other ways in which he is effeminized throughout the text.

Dexter also displays sadistic behaviour. In *After the Lovedeath*, Lawrence Kramer argues that the sexual violence that some men direct toward women is largely a product of gender polarity and gender essentialism.²¹³ Kramer suggests that the essentialism of

²¹¹ These could also be interpreted as "delusions of grandeur". *The Law and the Lady* includes many references to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Dexter is clearly meant to be a grotesque version of Prospero. The vision of brains boiling in Dexter's head alludes to the trope of brains boiling in one's skull which appears in *The Tempest* (Act V, sc. 1). Dexter not only has a servant called Ariel, whom he mistreats, but he appears to carry out transformations (into other characters), and he has sequestered himself in an isolated 'isle' in which visitors hear strange noises (Valeria, hearing the wheelchair rolling on the wooden floor, wonders what this 'extraordinary rumbling' sound can be (205)). Dexter also plays ethereal music.

²¹² I refer to Jenny Bourne Taylor's Oxford edition of *The Law and the Lady*. The relevant note explains a point on page 281 of the text.

²¹³ The "gender polarity" and "essentialist attitudes" referred to by Kramer refer to the practice of seeing women as being very different than, and lesser than, men, and as viewing established gender roles as being 'natural'. As Kramer explains, the duality of masculine-feminine that has been established in society encourages "masculine dominance" and men often claim "to occupy the masculine subject position absolutely rather than relatively". Therefore, "even the slightest fault line in idealization or desire" can provoke aggression and sexual violence (Kramer, 10). Gender polarity "must compulsively re-establish itself as the truth" (Kramer, 19).

gender can provoke insecurity and sadistic behaviour in males if they feel under pressure to secure and display their masculinity. While Kramer's theories are modern, we can see such a situation prefigured in *The Law and the Lady*. The sadism that Dexter inflicts on Ariel is likely the outcome of a desire for power that is fuelled by Dexter's insecurity about his appearance, his unfulfilled sexuality, and general ineffectiveness. Various critics have read Dexter's lack of legs as suggesting that he may lack genitals. While I see little textual support for this idea, it may be a symbolic suggestion of castration; even if never intended by the author in this way, the text certainly suggests that Dexter's disability has made him less attractive to women. Even Sara Macallan, who is said to be plain, rejects his romantic advances and seems to feel disgust for his "deformity" (388).²¹⁴

Lawrence Kramer also suggests that men actually become men by becoming "a male impersonator" (Kramer, 169). This observation also illuminates some aspects of Dexter's behaviour. Without a sexual life, Dexter cannot feel he is a complete man - but he can *impersonate* one. When acting, Dexter states that "For the time, I *am* the man I fancy myself to be" (218) – he is not only the *specific* famous man he is impersonating, but "the *man*" he wants to be (emphasis added). One can read Dexter's 'attack' upon Valeria not as a revelation of real desire, but as an attempt to reassert his masculinity.

The presence of Dexter's physical disability seems at least partially responsible for the development of morbidity and sadism in his artistic tastes and his general behaviour. It does not appear that Collins is suggesting that physical disability *must* lead to mental pathology – on the whole, Collins's fiction shows very little propensity to pathologize physically disabled people - but the disability does seem to contribute to a disruption in Dexter's mental health. The other major factors behind the development of such pathology appear to be Dexter's refusal to control his impulses, and his mistreatment by others.

The representation of Dexter also seems to contain commentaries about such issues as manic-depression, psychological compulsion and the dangers of excessive stimulation and sensibility. While Dexter suffers from manic and hysterical episodes, he also exhibits periods of calm and of extreme depression (231-32). A modern audience might

Throughout *The Law and the Lady* Eustace tries to assert his dominance over Valeria and becomes moody and violent. Miserrimus also dominates Ariel by teasing and hitting her. The novel suggests that these gender roles can only be maintained via forms of control. It therefore hints at what Kramer asserts: that relations between the sexes are fraught because many beliefs about the differences between the sexes are not true.

²¹⁴ Kramer suggests that sexual violence is the attempt to defer the realization that one has been "castrated" or that someone else possesses the phallus (see Kramer, 28-9).

be tempted to wonder if Dexter is ‘bipolar’, or if he suffers from manic-depression,²¹⁵ but *The Law and the Lady*, as a mid-Victorian text, frames this behaviour in terms of sensibility, passions, and moral management. When the reader witnesses Dexter’s mood swings, they must judge that either Dexter is not in control of them, or that he *does* maintain some degree of control over his moods, but surrenders himself to mania and melancholia. When Valeria first visits Dexter, she not only notices his eccentricity, but that his facial expressions change continually and that he has a tendency to become lost in thoughts (214). Valeria does not know what to make of this, but at this point in the novel, Dexter’s emotional lability and wandering mind do not necessarily seem to her to be examples of pathology.²¹⁶

During the interviews between Valeria and Dexter Collins’s novel also delves into theories of associationist psychology. Dexter is set off into depression whenever “any melancholy or terrible association[s]” is roused in him, and pushed toward mania by the mention of any “too exciting” subject (218). Dexter also makes observations about his own psychological condition. When first introduced to Valeria, he tells her that he has strong “sensibilities”, that, like anyone with an artistic temperament, he suffers from “melancholy”, that he sometimes goes into “hysterics”, that he is a “visionary”, that he is doomed to “nervous suffering”, that he is “tender-hearted”, and that this tender-heartedness dooms him to be “miserable” (208-09). He tells Valeria that he is a pressure-cooker of emotion and sensual impressions (218) and that he needs peace, quiet, and rest.

During her first visit to Dexter (the “First View”), Valeria experiences manic Dexter, as he plays leapfrog, cooks truffles, and tells her that he is compelled to act and create art. During her “Second View”, Valeria finds a changed version of Dexter:

Miserrimus Dexter languidly held out his hand. His head inclined pensively to one side; his large blue eyes looked at me piteously. Not a vestige seemed to be left of the raging, shouting creature of my first visit, who was Napoleon one moment and Shakespeare at another. Mr Dexter of the morning was a mild, thoughtful, melancholy man, who only recalled Mr Dexter of the night before by the inveterate oddity of his dress ...

‘This is one of my melancholy days. Tears rise unbidden to my eyes. I sigh and sorrow over myself; I languish for pity. Just think of what I am! A poor,

²¹⁵ I am aware that these are different mental illnesses, yet the two terms are commonly used as though they are nearly interchangeable. Because of the limitations of this thesis, I do not have the space to define each in clinical terms.

²¹⁶ It is debatable whether Dexter’s mind really *is* wandering at this point – he is thinking back to past events at Gleninch and to his friendships with Eustace and Sara Macallan. Dwelling on these events is actually ‘on-topic’, for Valeria has come to ask him about events at Gleninch, and Valeria bears a resemblance to Sara Macallan. This prompts Dexter’s associative chain of remembrance of past events (215-16).

solitary creature, cursed with a frightful deformity. How pitiable! How dreadful! My affectionate heart – wasted. My extraordinary talents – useless or misapplied. Sad! Sad! Sad! Please pity me (231-32).

Here, Dexter's ambiguous remark, "This is one of my melancholy days" (232) seems to suggest that he might have the ability to control his state of mind if he wished to.

However, it nevertheless seems he has only the extremes of mania or wretchedness to choose between.

The question of Dexter's degree of control over himself appears to be part of the novel's interrogation of the Victorian ideal of 'willpower' and the possibility of overcoming compulsions. William Battie stated in *A Treatise on Madness* (1758) that madness was primarily caused by "deluded imagination" (Battie, *A Treatise on Madness*, n.p.; qtd. in Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 194),²¹⁷ and during the early nineteenth century many physicians agreed that "madness was caused by too great an indulgence of the imagination" (Reed, 194) or by valuing imagination and emotion over rationality. Such views were maintained well into the mid-Victorian period: Anthony Trollope, for example, stated that madness "is what happens to people who cannot resolve the various demands of their passional natures" (Reed, 206). Whereas the Romantics had "exalted excesses of the imagination" (Reed, 195),²¹⁸ readers of *The Law and the Lady* are likely to have found Dexter's emotionality and responses to stimulation unreasonable.

This valuation of willpower was also attached to "a belief in the special dignity of man and his moral nature. Without the will the mind has no self-sustaining power, no special identity, no health apart from the body's health" (Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, 40). It was even believed that a person's willpower could be strong enough to stave off insanity, as suggested in the popular book *Man's Power Over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* (1843), by John Barlow.²¹⁹

All mental states have somatic origins, originating within the brain, the nervous system, or the sensory apparatus. At mid-century it was recognised that individuals have no control over the origin of mental states. Still, it was believed that mental states were "more or less governable by voluntary effort" (Noble, *The Human Mind*, 151; qtd. in

²¹⁷ Reed notes that Battie suggested "a medical man should not ignore the stomach, intestines, or uterus as seats of madness" (Reed, 195), therefore suggesting a more biological cause for madness. It may be possible then that *The Law and the Lady* implies that some of Dexter's mental and behavioural difficulties might result partly from digestive problems or problems with his abdominal area.

²¹⁸ Reed suggests that much Romantic thought was remarkably similar to "mental imbalance and melancholia" (Reed, 195). If this is generally correct, then Dexter may be read as a man who holds Romantic values but who is living in the wrong time period for them to be appreciated.

²¹⁹ This book is mentioned in Shuttleworth, "Preaching to the Nerves", 199.

Haley, 41); people “could engage their willpower” by purposely selecting what would be “followed up” (Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology*, 25; qtd. in Haley, 41). While emotions and feelings enter the human consciousness “automatically” the healthy human being can exercise willpower to restrain “the passions and appetites” and moderate “the claims they make upon the judgment” (Haley, 41). However, an unhealthy person does not regulate their will and control their emotions (Beale, *The Laws of Health in Relation to Mind and Body*, 152; paraphrased in Haley, 31-32). Meanwhile, someone especially melancholic or nervous might find themselves “in the grip of some crippling constitutional ailment” if they do not bring their “mental and physical systems” into balance (Haley, 31).

While Dexter seems to suffer from imbalances beyond his full control, Valeria also intuitively that Dexter *chooses* to display his inappropriate or troubled feelings, instead of repressing them (221). Either Dexter *lacks* the willpower to control such feelings, or he possesses such willpower but *chooses not to use it*. Yet Dexter claims that he would become more pathological were he *not* to express his feelings. *The Law and the Lady* therefore engages in a debate about will-power and the possibility or usefulness of ‘moral management’. While ordinary Victorian society prized willpower as the basis of self-control and individual achievement, moral management was a theory of self-control encouraged within many insane asylums. Such asylums promoted the idea that a patient could influence their own mental well-being by disciplining themselves to cut short inappropriate, repetitive, or negative behaviour and thoughts, and instead training themselves in healthy thought.

Dexter does not often attempt such self-discipline, but instead indulges his passions, dwells on morbid thoughts and memories, and overworks his brain. He shows an awareness that his eccentric interests and active imaginative life may lead him toward mental breakdown, but his vision of himself as a creative, powerful, individualistic and innovative being does not allow him to be disciplined and controlled. His eccentricity and lack of self-censorship may be the chief cause of his pathology. Catherine Peters picks up on this idea, claiming that *The Law and the Lady* demonstrates “the dangers of the imaginative and creative inner life” (Peters, *The King of Inventors*, 374). Dexter’s lack of willpower provides a hint that his mind may eventually degenerate, since it was considered that “the will is the agent of coordination within the mind” (Haley, 47-48).

In 1828 it had been suggested by Sir Andrew Halliday that insanity could be instigated by too much refinement and cultivation of the “organs of the mind” (Halliday,

A General View of the Present State of Lunatics and Lunatic Asylums, in Great Britain and Ireland, and in some other Kingdoms, n.p.; qtd in Reed, 196), and in 1830, John Conolly suggested that insanity “is often but a mere aggravation of little weaknesses, or a prolongation of transient varieties and mood of mind”. While “all men now and then experience” such things, they are “cherished and dwelt on only by a mind diseased” (Conolly, *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity*, 166-167; qtd. in Reed, 197).

Conolly’s remarks sound remarkably like the judgement Valeria makes about Dexter after her first encounter with him, and they also seem to be reflected in the term “eccentricity” that the characters in the novel apply to those people they do not approve of. The novel’s references to eccentricity may be part of its argument that there are few obvious borders between sane and insane behaviour, and appear to refer back to ideas expressed by Conolly.²²⁰ Conolly had also stated that there was no “strong and definable boundary between sanity and insanity” and that the idea of a solid borderline between sanity and sanity was “imaginary, and arbitrarily placed” (Conolly, *An Inquiry*, 295-96; qtd. in Reed, 197). Conolly believed that there was only a continuum of behaviours; eccentricity was situated at the beginning of the slope toward insanity.

Another view of insanity that began to emerge in the nineteenth century was that psychopathology often developed because people gave way to *passion* (Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 198).²²¹ Despite Dexter’s never being diagnosed as clinically insane, his behaviour seems tied to his desire to express his “passions”, as well as to engage in “eccentric” pursuits. It is therefore possible that Dexter’s mental difficulties would have been read by Victorian readers as a cautionary device. Lunacy had been used in earlier literature to warn readers away from dissipation and debauchery (Reed, 199-200). However, although Dexter’s degeneration warns readers of the dangers of uncontrolled emotion, at times the novel also seems to *validate* Dexter’s right to self-expression. Because the novel offers such a mixture of positions, it seems that the focus on Dexter’s eccentricity and lack of willpower is an ironic commentary on Victorian discourses of self-control.²²²

²²⁰ The viewpoint, that there is very little distinction or boundary between sanity and insanity, or that the idea of ‘sanity’ and ‘insanity’ partly depends on other people’s viewpoints, was to appear repeatedly in sensation fiction – it does so saliently in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

²²¹ John R. Reed writes that “Throughout the century, madness took one of two fundamental literary routes: either it was the result of a sinful, ruined life, or it was the necessary consequence of a passionate nature trapped in unbearable circumstances” (Reed, 201). The latter seems close to what happens in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

²²² It is already recognized that in some of his novels, Collins satirizes the Victorian valorization of ‘Self-Help’: he does this, for example, via Walter Hartright’s rise in *The Woman in White* (Walter’s rise has increasingly come to be read as negatively self-aggrandizing or as oppressing the female characters in the

As Dexter degenerates, *The Law and the Lady* also asks questions about the interconnection between the body and the mind. It is clear that some characters perceive Dexter's physical and mental problems to be interconnected: as Major Fitz-David states, Dexter's "mind is as deformed as his body" (191). While this assertion of Major Fitz-David's is unsympathetic, in the context of this novel, it appears to have some validity. It is likely that Victorian readers would have connected Dexter's bodily and mental health problems. In 1860 Thomas Laycock had explained in *Mind and Brain* that "it appears certain that no morbid change, however minute, can take place without a concurrent change, although not cognisable by observation, in the mind" (Laycock, *Mind and Brain*, Vol. I, 18-19; qtd. in Haley, 38). Henry Maudsley also claimed that "the integrity of the mental functions depends on the integrity of the bodily organization" (Rosner, "Deviance", 11).²²³ ²²⁴ Dexter was *born* without legs; he did not suffer any loss of limb later in life. However, the novel may imply that it is impossible for him to lack bodily integrity without also lacking mental integrity. One may therefore read his lack of legs as a materialized symbol of his mental 'imbalance'.

Major Fitz-David's comments suggest that Victorian society commonly perceived a natural association between physical and mental impairments. Yet the narratives of both *Hide and Seek* and *Poor Miss Finch* support the idea that physical disability need not necessarily lead to the development of mental pathology. While not necessarily suggesting that physical disability *must* lead to mental pathology, in *The Law and the Lady* Collins does develop the idea that in *some* people, physical disability may influence the development of a morbid psychological state, or hasten degeneration of the body.

Collins's novel also recognizes the contentiousness attending some psychiatric diagnoses, or more casual attributions of 'insanity'. Although Dexter is placed within a paradigm of degeneration, *The Law and the Lady* does not portray him as explicitly 'insane'. Instead, the only medical view presented of Dexter in the novel occurs when one doctor describes him as suffering from damaged nerves and as *liable* to become insane because he has "latent insanity" (281). If we view the later events of the novel as essentially bearing out the accuracy of what the doctor suggests, then it seems that

novel), and via Magdalene (in *No Name*) and Lydia Gwilt's (*Armada*) failed attempts to exert their own wills.

²²³ Rosner does not mention the title of the work by Maudsley being referred to, or the page number that is quoted, but does note that this quote from Maudsley appears in Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology*, 103. It is likely that she refers to *Body and Mind*.

²²⁴ At this point, Rosner discusses ideas raised by Maudsley in *Body and Mind* (1880), and quotes Maudsley as stating: "we find, for instance, 'the forms and habits of sexually mutilated men approach[ing] those of women'" (Maudsley, *Body and Mind*, 35). This may bear some relation to Dexter's psychology.

Dexter would not be considered clinically insane until he lapses into “imbecility” at the end of the novel (350). However, such a reading would contradict the opinions of various characters who appear to consider Dexter insane much earlier in the novel. Therefore, while Dexter’s mental status is left somewhat unclear, it appears that Collins is either criticising the ways that characters have attributed insanity to Dexter earlier in the novel, or that he is recognising the difficulties of interpreting behaviour.

Further ambiguity appears when one considers that “the theorists of moral management” claimed that insanity “was susceptible to treatment”. Moreover, as mentioned, some psychiatrists, including Maudsley, insisted that psychiatric “disease arose merely from an excess or deficiency of elements integral to normal functioning” (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 198). Such theories suggested not only that absolute divides “between the normal and the pathological” did not exist, but that anyone “could become insane by the slight movement into imbalance of his or her physiological and mental system” (Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 198). The idea that insanity was treatable implied that it was not a fixed state, and that sanity and insanity existed only on a scale of various behaviours. *The Law and the Lady* replicates such theories, depicting sanity and insanity as existing on a continuum, without a definitive division between them. The complexity of Dexter’s characterization and the range of reactions to him by other characters suggest that while science can offer some benchmarks that indicate insanity or mental wellness, sanity and insanity are to a large degree socially constructed categories, and are interpreted subjectively.

Such an approach also may also reflect the public’s growing awareness of controversies surrounding mental health. As the public became increasingly aware that diagnosis could be contentious, various novelists of the late 1850s and early 1860s began to express “resistance to medical expertise” in its relation to insanity (Small, *Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865*, 184). The appearance of such novels was also accompanied by the ‘Lunacy Panic’ of 1858-1859, which made it apparent that large numbers of healthy people “had been wrongly diagnosed as insane” (Small, 184). Collins had shown an interest in “writing about abnormal and pathological states of mind since the early 1850s” (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 185), but these later developments may have influenced his representation of insanity in *The Law and the Lady*.

Hints are given very soon after Dexter’s first appearance that it will not be easy to gauge the truth about his sanity. When reading the trial transcript, Valeria does not

recognize any problem with Dexter's psychology or mental processes – in fact, she feels impressed by his intelligence and lucidity (178, 199). It appears that neither Dexter's psychological problems nor any cognitive degeneration are identifiable from the transcript. Mrs Macallan does tell Valeria that Dexter's words during the trial were tidied up by the court reporters, because his testimony rambled (199). But Mrs Macallan may be an unreliable witness, as she is trying to dissuade Valeria from visiting Dexter. Moreover, when Valeria begins reading 'The Trial', she finds an official note that stresses the absolute accuracy of what is recorded in the transcript (124), and it seems unlikely that a court would allow any testimony during a criminal trial to be recorded inaccurately. It remains ambiguous whether Dexter's testimony was 'tidied up' or not, or whether his original words were in fact sensible.

Valeria does not regard Dexter as insane, but thinks of him as someone who appears highly eccentric because he gives way to his impulses (221-22). The distinction between Dexter and a 'sane' person may merely be, as Valeria implies, that Dexter indulges his whims, whereas most people do not (221). If this is correct, then being insane merely means deciding to exhibit socially unsanctioned behaviour – a point further emphasised when it becomes clear that people label Valeria as 'crazy' only when they feel uncomfortable about her behaviour. It is, of course, apparent that Dexter becomes increasingly mentally incapacitated, to the point where he can no longer control his mental processes. However, even when Dexter is sent to an asylum, it is still never stated that Dexter is finally, definitively 'insane'. As mentioned above, what Dexter's doctor does finally state about Dexter is that he has lapsed into "imbecility" (350).²²⁵

Since Dexter's physical disability and mental pathology are utilized to further the novel's plot, the way that *The Law and the Lady* uses Dexter may be regarded as an example of 'narrative prosthesis'.²²⁶ For example, the novel uses Dexter's periods of delirium to move the plot forward. Toward the end of the novel, Valeria finally gains the

²²⁵ *The Law and the Lady*'s asylum scenes appear to show the influence of an article that appeared in *Household Words*, telling the story of a visit Charles Dickens had made to St Luke's Hospital for the Insane in December 1851. Dickens's article, "A Curious Dance round a Curious Tree", appeared in *Household Words* in January 1852 (see also Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 81). In this article, Dickens describes witnessing a "lunatic's Christmas ball" at the asylum.

Collins began to write anonymous articles for *Household Words* from 1852 onward, so it is likely that he had read Dickens's article, or would have heard Dickens speak about the asylum visit. Dexter and Ariel are sequestered in an asylum that seems very similar to that described by Dickens (see *The Law and the Lady*, 358-59), and *The Law and the Lady* refers to a Christmas ball that takes place at the asylum (*The Law and the Lady*, 407).

²²⁶ 'Narrative Prosthesis' is a theory developed by Sharon Snyder and David T. Mitchell, and refers to the ways that disability is often used as a narrative device, location of stereotypes, or a symbol. Please refer back to my Introductory chapter, especially the section "Introduction to Disability and Disability Studies", pages 3-5 and 8-10.

information she needs from Dexter, but only when he becomes delirious. Such a development is in line with Jane Wood's observation about novelistic utilizations of delirium: "as a narrative device, delirium enables revelations" (Wood, *Passion and Pathology*, 113). Dexter's delirium also reflects Wood's assertions that "both delirium and anomalous individuals" are used in sensation novels as part of a deliberate violation of "codes of coherence and continuity" (Wood, 115). One may argue that the plot of *The Law and the Lady* actually requires Miserrimus Dexter break down, so that the secrets he hides can be revealed. This can only be done "through the disintegration of his consciousness and the piecing together of the fragments of his memory" (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 223).

Despite the difficulties of interpretation posed by this novel, it is possible to reach some conclusions about the messages that *The Law and the Lady* delivers about mental health. First, the novel promotes the idea that no-one's personal behaviour is always "governed by pure reason" (see "Note: Addressed to the Reader", *The Law and the Lady*, 3). People are sometimes governed by their passions (this occurs both with Dexter and with Valeria). This, according to Collins, is actually common. Further to this, it is seldom that anyone's behaviour is one hundred per cent 'sane' or 'insane', and the majority of people exhibit behaviour that moves along a continuum. Moreover, judgements about their behaviour might change, depending on who is observing them, and people's prejudices or limited understanding may make it difficult to judge others' behaviour accurately. Overall, Collins's novel suggests a greater need to recognize that behaviour is subject to interpretation and to mediated forms of representation. For this reason, it is also prone to *misinterpretation* and *misrepresentation*.

The novel does not display a belief in a wide gap between sanity and insanity. Instead, the suggested continuum of sanity-insanity is replicated by other continuums within the novel: disabled and able-bodied, male and female, socially free to move, and socially constrained. The novel collapses any rigid boundaries between these states. The most the novel appears to concede about insanity is that someone with an artistic temperament may be especially prone to irrationality or to mental disintegration. The novel also displays a strong awareness that insanity is a gendered concept and that it is often spoken of using language that links it to femininity, but the novel does not appear to actually support this association. Like much other sensation fiction, *The Law and the Lady*'s emphasis on subjectivity and uncertainty may even suggest, according to Jane Wood,

“the unverifiability of authorized versions of normality and reality” (Wood, 115; emphasis added).

The conclusions I have reached from my own readings of *The Law and the Lady* bear out the accuracy of Kate Flint’s assertion that “Collins uses certain individuals in order to collapse boundaries between the able-bodied and the impaired”, and that he stresses not the differences between the disabled and the able-bodied, but rather, their similarities (see Flint, 154). They also suggest the accuracy of Jenny Bourne Taylor’s statement that the complex and equivocal discussion of insanity in *The Law and the Lady* draws attention to the uncertainty of scientific knowledge. Her conclusion is that Dexter successfully represents “a fantastic magnification of competing psychological codes” and “of competing definitions of the perceptions and significance of the borderlands of insanity” (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 223).

The Law and the Lady therefore attaches a range of significations to Dexter’s mental and physical degeneration, the apparent contradictions in his representation drawing attention to the possible unreliability of the concepts being alluded to. Collins uses Dexter as a touchstone through which he examines cultural, legal and scientific issues regarding madness, categorization, taxonomy, gender roles, and moral decline, and the juxtaposition of Dexter’s story against Valeria’s need to resist being labelled as ‘crazy’ suggests there is no easy way to identify madness.

Dexter as narrative prosthesis: further connections between Dexter, Sara, and Valeria.

Literature commonly uses disability as a symbolic form of social commentary; the concept of ‘Narrative Prosthesis’ I have referred to throughout this thesis is one theory by which literary critics have examined this phenomenon. In its basic form, this means a study of how a work of literature uses a disabled character to move along elements of its plot, or to construct symbolic links between different characters and themes. As Teresa Mangum has noted, Collins’s novels frequently utilise “deformity” and “exaggeration” to communicate certain messages. In *The Law and the Lady* Collins uses exaggeration and deformity to create symbolic correlations between Dexter and other characters, and to create “a linguistic, structural, and thematic staging of the differences on which gender and genre depend” (Mangum, 285).

For example, the novel takes on additional significance when one examines Dexter’s story in correlation with the plot surrounding the death of Sara Macallan. Dexter’s odd appearance takes on new meaning when one realizes that Sara dies because she considers

herself not beautiful enough. It is literally a beauty aid that kills Sara. Via this poison, Sara becomes a victim both of the Victorian beauty industry and the social ideal of feminine beauty. Sara internalizes the values and guidelines of feminine beauty so completely that in her suicide note she makes the startling statement: “I am the next worst thing ... to a deformity – a plain woman” (388).²²⁷ In Sara’s mind, plainness works as a deformity and her lack of beauty has caused her to be ignored by her husband. Having internalized these beliefs, Sara develops further pathology and decides it is better to die.

The Law and the Lady therefore creates a relationship between mental pathology, social disability and the world of female beauty, as well as suggesting a (contested) continuity between plainness and deformity. In “How Do I Look?: Dymorphophobia and Obsession at the *Fin de Siècle*” Andrew Mangham convincingly describes Sara as a Victorian victim of body dysmorphic disorder, and notes that her rivalry with the more beautiful Mrs Beaulieu “plagues her with a sense of her own worthlessness” (Mangham, “How Do I Look?”, 87).²²⁸ The text presents body dysmorphia as a form of mental pathology, but also stresses that in social terms, plainness is a romantic disability.

Sara’s body dysmorphia plays an important part in *The Law and the Lady*’s exploration of society’s interest in and over-valuation of physical appearances. Both Sara and Valeria come to think of themselves as freaks. Meanwhile, Valeria carries out a symbolic repetition of Sara’s role – she is not only also Eustace Macallan’s wife, but she experiences the same pressure to live up to expectations of female behaviour and beauty. Dexter recognizes Valeria’s physical similarity to Sara (216), and Sara’s death is paralleled when Valeria applies makeup – against her own wishes, but in order to fulfil male desires. The novel registers that femininity and the demands of beauty require pretence and masquerade, but points out the negative consequences of this: Sara is led to think that plain women are abnormal, and abnormal women are monstrous.

²²⁷ Andrew Mangham also regards Sara’s statement as being extremely important (see Mangham, “How Do I Look?”, 86).

²²⁸ “Dymorphophobia” is a term coined in 1891 by Enrico Morselli. It refers to “the sudden appearance and fixation in the consciousness of the idea of one’s own deformity; the individual fears that he has become deformed or might become deformed, and experiences at this thought a feeling of inexpressible anxiety” (see Mangham, “How Do I Look?” 87). Morselli explained, “The ideas of being ugly ... are not, in themselves morbid ... But, when one of these ideas occupies someone’s attention repeatedly... compelling the individual to modify his behaviour ... then the psychological phenomena have gone beyond the range of normal” (Morselli, 108, quoted in Mangham, 87).

Karin Jacobson’s article “Plain Faces, Weird Cases” also provides a very good consideration of some of the meanings behind Sara’s death.

Moreover, despite the fact that Eustace is legally exonerated from the murder of his first wife, the novel implies that Eustace is *guilty* of her death, killing her via his total indifference to her. Collins implicitly condemns Eustace's failure to love his first wife or to reassure her about her looks, and his preference for a woman who is beautiful, rather than a woman who truly loves him. Sara's true 'beauty' is only apparent to another 'ugly' character, Dexter. The suggestion may be that society's restrictive obsession with exterior appearance, and its negative responses to plain or 'disfigured' people, is the real poison. The gender roles that make such values and occurrences possible are also implicated: the males in *The Law and the Lady* have the power to make demands on their female partners about how they look or how they behave. Consequently, women in the novel die – or severely compromise their choices – to please their masters: Sara dies from applying beauty treatments, while Ariel dies on Dexter's grave.

Meanwhile, Dexter's unusual gender performance and interest in role-playing links him to the issues of feminine gender performance that concern Sara and Valeria. Critics have noted the way that Collins emphasises "role-playing as the basis for gender identity", in some of his other novels (including *The Woman in White* and *Armada*) and his realization that beliefs about gender are historically specific (Hall, *Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid-Victorian Novelists*, 174; qtd. in Radford, 108). In *The Law and the Lady* Collins's criticism of social responses to disability is inextricable from the criticism he directs toward the way that women were expected to carry out self-negating, self-disabling behaviour.

One salient feature of *The Law and the Lady*, then, is how the novel establishes and expands upon Dexter's symbolic connections with Valeria (and Sara) by suggesting and creating a symbolic connection of 'disability-femininity-insanity'. Via this exploration, the novel delivers troubling indications of how femininity is sometimes socially positioned as a form of 'insanity', while also explaining how being female is sometimes a social disability.

The novel's exploration of how the female is societally positioned as similar to an insane person is first indicated via the novel's discussion of the forms of ratiocination practised by Valeria. Jenny Bourne Taylor notes that rather than use the "rational induction of scientific evidence", Valeria pursues "random associations" (Taylor, "Introduction", *The Law and the Lady*, xvii). This kind of intuitive logic is presented as feminine, and seems to be rejected by many other characters, yet Valeria's "feminine" forms of logic are successful, backing up Collins's major idea that the world does not

necessarily work according to what is traditionally perceived as “logical”. Taylor also points out that Valeria’s “illogicality” is linked to the way that Dexter’s characterization is used to investigate “the boundaries of consciousness” (Taylor, *ibid.*, xxii).²²⁹

The key to unravelling the secrets about Sara’s death lies in Valeria’s ability to gain access to Dexter’s exclusive knowledge about past events. Significantly, from the very first time that Valeria seeks Dexter’s help, Dexter is framed in terms of paradigms of medical and psychological fitness – these paradigms are soon extended to encompass Valeria as well, as other characters make judgments about her. In Chapter XXI (“I See My Way”) Valeria decides:

I had good reasons ... for believing that the *fittest* person to advise and assist me, was – Miserrimus Dexter. He might disappoint the expectations that I had fixed on him, or he might refuse to help me, or (like my uncle Starkweather) he might think I had taken leave of my *senses*. All these events were possible. Nevertheless, I held to my resolution to *try the experiment* (183, emphasis added).

But Valeria’s belief in Dexter’s ‘fitness’ is immediately compromised when Major Fitz-David informs her that “In all England you could not have picked out a person more essentially *unfit* to be introduced to a lady” (191; emphasis added). Major Fitz-David and Mrs Macallan go on to describe Dexter as a mixture of sense and nonsense (191, 199).

We can see from the passage above, that Valeria regards her upcoming first interview with Dexter as an “experiment”. The scientific metaphor continues as Valeria reads Dexter’s body and probes his mind for clues, as though she is a scientist or judge. Establishing herself as observer or interpreter, Valeria replicates the position taken toward the disabled by the medical field.

However, it is not only Dexter who society posits as ‘insane’; when Valeria meets Dexter, she becomes caught up in a debate over what society thinks it means to be insane. Valeria is not only told by others that Dexter is crazy, but that *she* is crazy to investigate her husband’s past. She expresses her fear that even Dexter might respond to her as if she is crazy, but pushes this fear aside (184). Valeria’s interactions with Dexter allow her to explore her own aptitudes, and eventually to prove that her aim of overturning the Scotch verdict is reasonable. However, in order to do so, she must first overcome all the social obstacles that threaten to render her socially ‘disabled’ and ineffective.

Because Valeria is a young woman, at first she faces the fact of having to rely on Major Fitz-David to effect an introduction with Dexter. Valeria is frustrated by feeling

²²⁹ Taylor’s statement is also quoted by Mangum. See Mangum, 294-95.

unable to act: “With a letter of introduction, I might have seen Miserrimus Dexter that afternoon. As it was, the ‘little dinner’ compelled me to wait *in absolute inaction*, through a whole week” (193, emphasis added). Instead, Valeria constructs her own plan for approaching Dexter and clearing Eustace of the suspicion of murder, but Mrs Macallan tells her forthrightly that the investigation will be impossible because Valeria is a woman. She explains to Valeria “the thing you have got into your head to do, *is not to be done by you*” (198, emphasis added). In Mrs Macallan’s view, if men, trained professionals, tried and failed to establish Eustace’s innocence, it would be impossible for a *woman* - an untrained amateur - to do so. Perhaps even more disturbing is that Mrs Macallan links Valeria’s wish to be a female investigator with the idea of insanity, asking her “*Are you out of your senses?*” (199, emphasis added).

Valeria, who already feels disabled by the limitations she faces, is now labelled deviant, and accused, although informally, of being insane. As she tries to find a remedy for Eustace’s legal problem, she finds that all of the information she needs, and the keys to obtain it, are in the hands of males. Most of these male figures oppose her attempts to gain access to the knowledge, and view her as ‘ill’ for seeking such knowledge. In one example of this medico-psychological trope, Eustace sets himself up as Valeria’s physician and advisor, telling her that she should be still and quiet and accept her position – in effect, prescribing a ‘rest-cure’. Meanwhile, Valeria’s uncle, Doctor Starkweather, condescendingly suggests that “The poor thing’s troubles have turned her brain!” (120). Even Valeria’s more sympathetic uncle, Uncle Benjamin, becomes determined to convince her of the insanity of her scheme, describing Dexter as diseased and Valeria as liable to infection: “I declare to Heaven, Valeria, I believe that monster’s madness is infectious – and you have caught it!” (319).

In fact, Eustace and Mrs Macallan attempt to persuade Valeria that she is acting *hysterically*. ‘Hysteria’, the ambiguous and “archetypal female nervous disorder” was over-diagnosed during the Victorian period because its “clinical criteria could be modified” to diagnose as hysterical “all the behaviours which did not fit the prescribed model of Victorian womanhood” (Wood, op cit., 12). Such a process is particularly apparent in *The Law and the Lady*, since the attempts by others to convince Valeria of her hysteria occur only when she shows a determination to fulfil her plans – especially when doing so would require her to take on traditionally masculine or professional roles.

Valeria is repeatedly told by others to obey her husband, to leave the past alone, and that she is better off not knowing the truth. Therefore, apart from imputing ‘craziness’ to

Valeria, society also tries to push her toward a position of passivity, lack of knowledge, and ineffectiveness – a position of social disability. Her decision to reject such attempts to disable her, and to continue investigating threatens her position as a normal wife, and perhaps even as a normal ‘woman’. In addition to being a mystery story, therefore, *The Law and the Lady* portrays a woman’s struggles to grapple with the Victorian legal system and against constricting codes for female behaviour. The legal system does not give Valeria the answers she needs, and wider society appears to resist the idea of a woman taking actions proscribed by her husband.²³⁰ Mrs Macallan actually raises the issue of Valeria’s freedom of movement when she tells Valeria: “I have no right to control your movements” (225) – but despite this disclaimer, various characters try to dissuade Valeria via criticism, emotional blackmail, or suggestions that women lack the mental ability to succeed in serious endeavours. Even when Valeria chooses to resist such discourses, she finds that she can only access information when she caters to feminine stereotypes - such as when she reluctantly applies cosmetics and obtains information from Major Fitz-David because he is impressed by her beauty (56-57).

Collins’s novel therefore explores another level of ‘disability’ located in the social rules and systems that circumscribe Valeria’s mobility and her access to knowledge. Because of the prohibitions faced by females Valeria is literally *unable* to do some things, or is disadvantaged. Here, I believe, lies the key to understanding why Dexter is represented as legless – his situation corresponds with Valeria’s. Dexter hardly ever leaves his house, cannot contribute much to society, is emotional, and is regarded with social disapproval. He is regarded as a ‘freak’ by many, while, as Teresa Mangum has commented, unless Valeria “can provide evidence of her husband’s innocence, she will herself be a visible freak – as the wife of a murderer, as the carrier of a murderer’s blood line” (Mangum, 300). However, Valeria also risks being seen as a freak if she investigates the murder, because “almost any construction of female agency can be regarded as a dangerous flirtation with monstrosity” (Benjamin, *A Question of Identity*, 14).

Those characters who oppose Valeria suggest that she has an overactive imagination – an idea also suggestive of a link between her and Dexter. Valeria recognizes a degree of affinity, stating that “My plans and projects were sufficiently strange, sufficiently wide of the ordinary limits of a woman’s thoughts and actions, to attract his sympathies” (243-

²³⁰ This injunction is alluded to in the opening paragraph of the novel, as sections of the Marriage Service are recited (*The Law and the Lady*, 7).

44). At the beginning of the novel, Valeria cannot escape thinking of Dexter as “the deformed man, with the strange name” (184), but as the novel progresses, she begins to defend him to her acquaintances (220), and to realize that his frustrations echo some of her own.

Collins’s novel thus speaks toward what has long been perceived as a metaphoric link between femininity and disability. Modern day disability studies recognize that throughout the centuries discourses about disability have represented people with disabilities as having feminine characteristics and as holding feminine subject positions. Messages about disability have traditionally replicated wider cultural and medical alignments of the ‘natural’ health of masculinity versus the ‘weakness’ or ‘incomplete’ nature of femininity. Men who are disabled have often been represented as emasculated, effeminized, or de-sexualized. Such discourses have traditionally denigrated the disabled via their association with the female (implicitly, this discourse also denigrates women or the feminine).

Although such discourses are troubling, they do reflect that in the western world, females and people with disabilities are similarly disenfranchised, when one considers their positions of limited power in relation to the rights enjoyed by the able-bodied, or the able-bodied male. Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains that sexist and ableist ideologies work in a similar fashion:

Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority ... Examples abound, from Freud’s delineating femaleness in terms of castration to late-nineteenth-century physicians’ defining menstruation a disabling and restricting “eternal wound” to Thorstein Veblen’s describing women in 1899 as literally disabled by feminine roles and costuming (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 19).

These beliefs have become entrenched in western culture, and date back to ancient Greece: Aristotle considered ‘man’ to be the ‘normal’ being and woman as a deviation from the norm (see Mangum, 297). Thomson therefore suggests that feminist theory and disability theory can share pertinent observations with each other about gender and power relations (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 20), because “femininity and disability are inextricably entangled in patriarchal culture” (Thomson, *ibid.*, 27).

Collins wrote without an awareness of the history and philosophy of modern feminist theory or disability studies. Nevertheless, his writing displays awareness of the fact that women and the disabled are spoken about via similar discourses that place them in

positions of social inferiority, and that social injustice may follow in the wake of such attitudes. *The Law and the Lady* shows that expectations of female behaviour (passivity, illness, isolation, lack of agency) are very similar to what society often expects of the disabled. The novel's concentration on the issue of women's marital and property rights and on the difficulties Valeria faces to fix her situation also suggests that the women of the Victorian era are socially disabled. Valeria's struggle with a world that is male-dominated²³¹ has similarities with the way that disabled people are forced to live in a world that is designed for the able-bodied, and which awards the able-bodied the power to define what is 'normal'. *The Law and the Lady* suggests there is a socially-sanctioned opposition between able-bodied and active masculinity and constricted, disabled femininity – but it also suggests the artificiality of such oppositions by depicting two characters, Valeria and Dexter, who sometimes manage to overcome restrictions.

During my own discussions of Dexter, I had focused largely on many of the disruptions made by Dexter's character. However, I should note that it has also been suggested by some critics that Dexter finally functions to aid the story's love plot. He could, therefore, be considered as functioning as a narrative prosthesis in this regard as well. Melissa Free, focusing especially on Jenny Wren of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) and Ezra Jennings of *The Moonstone* (1868), points out that a considerable number of Victorian novels feature a "freakish figure" who is "a textual receptacle for non-normative desire, race, and physicality", yet who is used to bolster the normative (heterosexual) love plot. Such characters are "useful in establishing order but necessarily disposable once that order is restored" (Free, "Freaks that Matter", 259-60). In *The Law and the Lady* Dexter provides the clues for solving the mystery about Sara's death, and this aids the resolution of the love plot between Valeria and Eustace. Having fulfilled this role, Dexter is discarded.

Obviously, Dexter dies at the end of this novel. Teresa Mangum suggests that the novel silences Dexter, probably because he has "broken with formal conventions" (Mangum, 288). It is indeed possible to read the ending of *The Law and the Lady* as disciplinary, finally curtailing any threats of subversion. However, as Dennis Denisoff notes, the final excision of a character as transgressive as Dexter is not completely convincing (Denisoff, 52). By the time Dexter exits the novel he has already disrupted ideas that previously seemed secure; as Mangum herself notes, he has transgressed the

²³¹ Teresa Mangum also recognizes that the representation of Dexter's body "establishes correspondences between 'a poor deformed wretch' (*The Law and the Lady*, 293) and a female detective" (Mangum, 286).

boundaries between “‘normal’ and monstrous, sanity and madness, wholeness and fragmentation”, while reminding us of the fragility of “boundaries between male and female” (Mangum, 295).

I argue that rather than simply being used to aid the love plot, Dexter is used as a figure to criticise the unconditional love and devotion expected of wives toward their husbands: after Dexter’s death, we are provided with the image of the loyal Ariel lying on his grave; an image which is soon followed by Valeria’s continuing loyalty to the undeserving Eustace at the novel’s very end, when she chooses to shield her husband from further pain. Valeria may return to her husband, but by this point Valeria’s loyalty to him has already been exposed as misplaced; her love is ‘irrational’.

Conclusion.

The Law and the Lady is unusual and powerful in its awareness of how society narrates as disabled anything “which characterizes a body as deviant from shared norms of bodily appearance and ability” (see Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 20) and in its recognition that in order to maintain such categories, society is forced to constantly bolster ideas of the normative.²³² Part of the interest of *The Law and the Lady*’s narrative is how it attempts to disrupt or deconstruct such processes. Collins’s novel critiques ideas of ‘normalcy’ by exploring the implications of ideological links between disability, femininity, and insanity, and by revealing the stigmatization of the non-normative Dexter and Valeria as unfairly driven by other characters’ wishes to maintain established forms of social power.

This chapter has largely focused on the meanings of Miserrimus Dexter’s disabilities, but has also stressed his symbolic connections with Valeria. Dexter’s representation is unusual first because Collins does not focus on Dexter merely as a spectacle or as a source of pathos. Although Valeria does once refer to Dexter as a “cripple” (299), her general movement is away from labelling him in ways that encourage pity, fear, or stigma. The close engagement of Collins’s text with Dexter and Collins’s decision not to respond to Dexter with ‘ableist’ attitudes but rather to use his representation to question the basis of such attitudes, differs from the ways that contemporaneous writers tended to represent or engage with disabled characters. First, Dexter is accorded an influential role in the novel and close attention is paid to his psychology, so that he appears as a well-rounded character. This contrasts with, for example, how Dickens represented many of

²³² See Lennard J. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy”, 23.

his disabled characters. Julia Miele Rodas points out that with Dickens's representations of disabled characters in *American Notes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *A Christmas Carol* and *David Copperfield*, the subjectivity of these characters is not determined by the disabled characters themselves but by the narrator or by other characters. In these works, what we apparently learn about a disabled character usually reveals far more about the story's *narrator* than about the disabled character (Rodas, "Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher", 60-61).²³³ We do not experience this distancing in Collins's novels, and especially not in *The Law and the Lady*. Valeria does not encounter Dexter from a 'safe distance' or merely project her own ideas onto him, but begins to listen to his viewpoints.

In fact, Valeria comes near enough to Dexter to encounter an amorous approach (299). This portrayal of Dexter as a sexual being is also unusual and unflinching. Collins stressed the sexual feelings of Lucilla Finch and Madonna Blyth in his earlier novels, but they were heroines with sensory disabilities, which would have been regarded as more 'poetic' and less disfiguring than a limb malformation. It is very likely that Dexter's sexualization would have seemed shocking to some Victorian readers; this is apparent from the fact that Dexter's sexual advance on Valeria is the only passage *The Graphic* attempted to censor.²³⁴ *The Law and the Lady* also uncovers the sexual and romantic feelings of Sara Macallan, another non-normative figure in the sense that she considers herself ugly. This focus on the sexuality of those who are disabled or who do not match the standards of the 'norm' even now appears unusual: even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century novels and films tend to obscure or deny the fact that disabled people have sexual feelings (see Stoddard Holmes, "'Bolder with her Lover'" 60-62; and, to a lesser extent, Cahill and Norden, "Hollywood's Portrayals", 60).

Another important achievement of Collins's novel is its recognition, many years before the development of disability studies, that disability is a *political* concept: it is a legal and medical construction created by social forces.²³⁵ Although the realm of the physical and the mental *is* part of 'disability', disability is also culturally constructed: often, people are treated as disabled because they are considered corporeally deviant, or

²³³ Rodas explains, for example, that in *American Notes* Dickens does not discuss Laura Bridgman and her personal experiences and feelings so much as project what he thinks about her, notably that her life must be very circumscribed (Rodas, "Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha", 60-61).

²³⁴ See Jenny Bourne Taylor, "Note on the Text", xxv-xxvi, in the Oxford World's Classics edition of *The Law and the Lady*, and Peters, *King of Inventors*, 371.

²³⁵ Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes about the difference between discussions of people with disabilities as "cripples" and "grotesques", which are carried out using "aesthetic" frames of reference, and discussions of the "disabled", which are more likely to consider "political" issues (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 14-15).

because of “cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 6). Valeria comes to understand this and to reject some such constructions, for example, rejecting Eustace’s claim that his mother is “eccentric” (*The Law and the Lady*, 32) and resisting the idea that Dexter is insane (221). In this novel, Collins also demonstrates that disability exists on “multiple axes of identity” (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 21), making this explicit via the novel’s exploration of the links between disability and the condition of women - primarily by depicting Valeria’s lack of legal rights once she is married. Sensation fiction often focuses on women’s rights,²³⁶ but the link Collins makes here between femininity and disability is particularly substantial and particularly specific. *The Law and the Lady* resists the social forces that place women in positions of disability, partly via its attempts to undermine the perceived links between women and some mental illnesses. One such example is the rejection of an exclusive connection of hysteria with femininity. Valeria cannot truly be regarded as hysterical, and instead, it is Dexter and Eustace who show signs of this disorder, with Eustace becoming a nervous wreck after his first wife’s death.

The Law and the Lady also reverses the typically gendered positions of observer and subject. Sensation fiction tended to show females being identified as pathological after being observed by males. Such watching and judgment is prevalent in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, where scopophilia buttresses patriarchal power. In Braddon’s novel the detective Robert Audley fears that he may be infected by monomania due to his proximity to Lady Audley. But in *The Law and the Lady*, the apparently pathological individual under scrutiny is male and the amateur detective is female.

However, Valeria does have a social ‘disability’, largely comprised of attempted restrictions on her movement or achievement. Valeria lacks the phallus, just as Dexter lacks legs, and both are excluded from the privileges usually assigned to males. Women are physically disabled by skirts, petticoats, corsets, and by actual restrictions on behaviour --- this is mirrored by Dexter’s physical disabilities. Meanwhile, restrictions on women’s *mental* lives may be mirrored by Dexter’s mental breakdown. It is also telling that Valeria is only able to move freely and take actions that lead to her solving the novel’s mystery once she is separated from her husband and acts as though she is *not* married. This may imply that perhaps Collins did not see *all* Victorian women as

²³⁶ Andrew Radford suggests that this may reflect that “the 1860s was the decade of a second Reform Bill ... as well as the establishment of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage (1866)” (Radford, 6).

occupying a 'disabled' subject position, but considered that it is the *married* Victorian woman who is the most disabled.

Many critics have failed to see that Eustace is an unsatisfactory love interest. The relationship between Eustace and Valeria is unequal, exploitative and coercive, and to realise Collins's critical stance toward Eustace one need only look closely at how Ariel, classified as an "idiot", is shown to be utterly subservient to her "Master". Some implications here are that women who obey their 'masters' slavishly allow themselves to be treated as idiots, are behaving no better than fawning dogs, or are allowing their growth to be curtailed. In *The Tempest*, Ariel is trapped as Prospero's slave; this is reflected in Collins's novel, as Ariel fetches things for Dexter, grooms him, feels jealous of other women, and feels unable to live without him. Dexter pulls enjoyable things out of Ariel's reach, and threatens punishment if Ariel attempts to rebel. Dexter's sadism toward Ariel is merely a hyperbolic version of how Eustace treats Valeria, and Ariel's devotion to Dexter an exaggeration of how Victorian society hoped wives would act; it is, in fact, an exaggeration of the traits Valeria displays in her devotion to Eustace. Ariel, loyal to the end, dies on Dexter's grave, while at the end of the novel Valeria valiantly protects her husband and makes excuses for him.

Meanwhile, just as Dexter has compulsions and manias, so Valeria continues to love her unworthy husband. Her compulsive love for him (238) may itself be a form of madness. Throughout the novel Valeria is pushed toward a combination of Dexter's disenfranchised, abject subject position and Ariel's idiotic, abused subject position; part of her task is to combat such forms of oppression while still retaining her relationship with her husband.

It is difficult, therefore, not to read *The Law and the Lady* as an indictment of the marriage union's expectation of female obedience and servitude. The novel's correlations between monstrosity, femininity, idiocy, and disability prompt conclusions that a wife's subject position is similar to experiencing a disability in terms of restrictions to freedom of movement, freedom of thought, the loss of property, and the irrationality of romantic love for someone who does not treat you as an equal. *The Law and the Lady* does not depict the dismantling of the gender roles that encourage these problems, but it portrays Valeria as most likeable and brave when she attempts to overcome discriminatory barriers.

While *The Law and the Lady* examines socio-legal constructions of disability, it also considers issues relating to the body, even seeming to posit that the body itself is a

construction. By doing so it reveals the insubstantial nature of the able-bodied-disabled binary. However, this particular interest is also a reflection of its use of Gothic tropes. Catherine Spooner has noted that “the body in Gothic fictions is a profoundly unstable concept”; that there is, in fact, “no natural or authentic body in Gothic fictions, but only socially and sartorially constructed bodies” (Spooner, 201).

As part of this somatic focus, Collins criticizes the social expectation that women should be beautiful and shows that such pressures can trigger pathological behaviour. *The Law and the Lady* recognizes the disturbing idea (or perhaps sorry fact) that for a woman, lack of beauty will act as a ‘disability’ when it comes to finding a husband or keeping his interest. But it also points out that even if a woman *does* possess beauty, the existence of this beauty is generally reliant on carrying out various beauty regimens – beauty is *an act* that relies on cosmetics and masquerade. The novel suggests that societal obsessions with beauty are ultimately futile and damaging, and also shows how they are linked to the devaluing of the physically disabled. With its characterization of Sara and Dexter’s juxtaposition of the classically handsome and the ‘deformed’, *The Law and the Lady* continues the questioning of societal norms of beauty that had appeared in *The Woman in White*. Just as Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* is said to have a beautiful body and an ugly face, Dexter has a beautiful face and ‘ugly’ body. Collins has a clear interest in the effects of perceived incongruity and in how entrenched aesthetic ideals can lead us to misjudge or undervalue people. Characters’ interactions with Dexter in *The Law and the Lady* are also used to provide commentary on “the broad operations of phenomenological knowledge” (Flint, 154), on how the senses interact with the mind, how people respond to spectacular bodies, and how society’s ideas about physical and mental functioning affect beliefs about gender roles.

The novel’s focus on the ugly versus the beautiful and the sane versus the insane also contributes to a questioning of how society establishes rules, classifications, and differences. The androgynous appearances and behaviours of Dexter and Valeria complicate such questions and their answers, as Valeria takes on the ‘male’ characteristics of determination and investigative ability, while Dexter wears colourful clothing, cooks truffles, and dissolves into fits of sensibility. The complexity of these characters exemplifies how disability in literature can act “as an interrupting force that confronts cultural truisms” (Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis”, 16), or as a force that can allow “authors the metaphoric play between social and individual registers of meaning” – acting as “a critical bridge between concrete experience and abstract commentary” (see

Davis, "Constructing Normalcy", 27). By means of these characters, a story ostensibly about a murder also communicates an allegory about the status of women and an exposé of negative social attitudes toward those with disabilities.

Throughout all of his work, but most assuredly in *The Law and the Lady*, Collins emerges as one of the rare writers who offers alternative patterns for viewing and describing people with disabilities. The novel first introduces Dexter as 'alien', with his subjectivity determined by other people's commentary about him, but later Dexter speaks for himself. The reader is provided with interpretations of Dexter that counter any other characters' wishes to objectify him or to see him as pathological, useless, pitiable, or frightening, while Valeria's movement toward identification with Dexter demonstrates how individuals may counter or reject pejorative or ignorant views of the disabled.

Ultimately, *The Law and the Lady* makes use of Dexter, Ariel, and Valeria to communicate messages that seem distinctly anti-'ableist'. Despite its melodrama, it enacts an extremely complex discourse about disability, as it attempts to depict realistically the physical and mental difficulties caused by disabilities, while also examining how it is that society makes mobility especially difficult for both women and the disabled. Perhaps it is this feature of Collins's plots that makes his novels appear particularly relevant today, as our own society still struggles with recognising the levels of prejudice and unfair treatment that are directed toward people with disabilities, people of colour, women, and other people classified as different.

SECTION TWO: **MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON AND DISABLED IDENTITIES**

Introduction to disability in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Despite the fact that “the sensation novel and the sentimental story” were “notorious for their mawkish and uni-dimensional depictions of physically or cognitively-impaired characters” (Ferguson, “Sensational Dependence: Prosthesis and Affect in Dickens and Braddon”, 2), we have seen that the characterizations of disabled people in several novels by Wilkie Collins escape such limitations. Various works by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, another sensation novelist writing from the 1860s onwards, also manage to avoid simplistic or sentimentalized representations of physical and mental disability. In this section I shall consider representations of disability in two novels by Braddon: her first novel *The Trail of the Serpent*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* (now her best-known book), while also making brief mention of one of her later novels, *John Marchmont’s Legacy*. *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *John Marchmont’s Legacy* both investigate the roles expected of women and the difficulties attendant on successfully performing femininity, and not only suggest that the constraints of feminine roles may actually *prompt* insanity, but also put forward the idea that any attempt by a woman to rebel against such constraints could lead to authorities branding her ‘insane’. The perceived interactions between femininity and mental health clearly interested Braddon.

In this section I shall also demonstrate that, like Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon showed great originality and complexity when portraying physical disability, skill demonstrated clearly by her brilliant portrayal of a mute detective in *The Trail of the Serpent*. Braddon’s portrayals of characters who are disabled or labelled as disabled (in terms of mental deviancy) suggest that, like Collins, Braddon was interested in Victorian ideas about the normative, and in what behaviours society expected from disadvantaged groups.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was not only a prolific writer,²³⁷ but an extremely popular one. Various sources claim that her novels often out-sold those of Eliot, Dickens, and Collins. Her career was long, and her popularity continued well into the early twentieth century. While her early novels, which are usually considered as belonging to the sensation genre, were often criticized, Braddon began to write more domestic novels as

²³⁷ “Between 1860 and her death in 1915, Braddon published 85 novels under her own name and was lauded by Henry James as ‘a soldier in the great army of constant producers’” (James, “Alphonse Daudet”, in *Partial Portraits*; qtd in Radford, 23).

the century wore on, and became accepted more readily by the critics. However, it is now those same early novels that were damned by Victorian critics that most interest modern-day critics, generally due to these novels' provocative portrayals of women struggling to cope with social expectations. Few critics, however, have pointed out that she was also innovative in her portrayals of mental and physical disability. I aim to address this gap in scholarship by pointing out ways in which Braddon's writing shows a consistent involvement with issues relating to physical and mental disability, and the ways in which these representations of disability are complex and progressive.

This study of representations of disability in sensation fiction includes two chapters on novels by Braddon because, like Wilkie Collins, she often wrote about forms of mental, physical, or cultural disability. Collins's representations of disability are on the whole the most remarkable and innovative representations of disability produced by sensation novelists. He also exerted a great deal of (indirect) stylistic influence over Braddon.²³⁸ However, as well as penning *Lady Audley's Secret*, which features a very critical representation of the psychiatric profession, Braddon showed herself very capable of creating an innovative and challenging representation of someone with a physical disability. Her very assured and very unusual representation of a mute man, Joseph Peters, actually appears in her very first novel, *The Trail of the Serpent*. While the novel seems to share a similar approach to how Collins depicted physical disability – Braddon evidently wishes to avoid attaching any sense of pathos or pathology to mutism – the novel was published well before many of Collins's most fascinating representations of disability had been written. In addition to focusing on this novel's remarkable depiction of mutism, I also examine the novel's depiction of a morally insane individual, Jabez North. Not only is his representation an interesting early study of sociopathy, but I shall argue that it can also be used to illuminate Braddon's later depiction of sociopathy in *Lady Audley's Secret*. This connection between the two novels has not been identified by previous critics.

²³⁸ While Collins and Braddon do not seem to have been especially close friends, Collins paid visits to Braddon (see Maxwell, "Time Gathered", 22; qtd. in Maunder, *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures*, 150). Braddon also publicly acknowledged her professional and stylistic indebtedness to Collins: in an interview conducted in 1887 she told Joseph Hatton: "I always say that I owe 'Lady Audley's Secret' to 'The Woman in White'. Wilkie Collins is assuredly my literary father. My admiration for 'The Woman in White' inspired me with the idea of 'Lady Audley's Secret' as a novel of construction and character" (Hatton, "Miss Braddon at Home", *London Society*; qtd in Wolff, 324). Both were particularly close to another sensation novelist, Charles Reade. Many letters and visits were exchanged between Collins and Reade, and the closeness of Braddon's friendship with Reade is recognized in various sources (see, for example, Wolff, *Sensational Victorian*, 9, 79 and Maunder, *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures* V, 117, 119).

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT (1860-1):

The Trail of the Serpent was Mary Elizabeth Braddon's first novel, written soon after she had given up acting on the provincial stage.²³⁹ It was written when Braddon was only twenty-five and had previously published nothing but poetry; yet it is an enjoyable and accomplished novel. On the surface it is a rather lurid narrative that throws together murder and other incidents of extreme melodrama. However, it should deservedly claim critical and popular attention as one of the earliest examples of the British detective novel. The novel is also extremely unusual due to its highly sympathetic and detailed representation of a character who is mute. The mute character in question, Joseph Peters, is an astute and hard-working detective who becomes highly successful in his profession despite initially being hampered by his disability or by other people's negative responses to it. Simply depicting a disabled character who practices a profession rather than being unemployed is already a rarity, but Braddon also positions Peters's professional work at the centre of the novel's plot, awarding her mute character an unusual degree of centrality in the narrative. *The Trail of the Serpent* is also particularly novel and innovative in the care Braddon takes to accurately depict Peters's use of the manual finger alphabet, a component of sign language, and to present it as being an integral part of his methods of detection.

*The Trail of the Serpent*²⁴⁰ has not been well served by literary criticism in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. While Chris Willis provided a short "Afterword", and Sarah Waters provided a brief "Introduction" to the recent Modern Library Classics edition of *The Trail of the Serpent*, Christine Ferguson is the only other scholar to have analysed *The Trail of the Serpent* in any sustained piece of criticism. The only other critical discussions of this novel are very brief and appear in biographies of Braddon. Some of this neglect may stem from the fact that *The Trail of the Serpent* was out of

²³⁹ Braddon wrote the novel thanks to the financial backing of a wealthy squire, John Gilby, who may have been in love with her. See Wolff, 79-94 and Carnell, *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, 79, 105-09.

²⁴⁰ *The Trail of the Serpent* was originally titled *Three Times Dead, or The Secret of the Heath*. *Three Times Dead* was written in 1860 while Braddon resided at Beverley, in Yorkshire. *Three Times Dead* was published in penny parts by a printer called C.H. Empson. The novel had a small publication run and did not sell well. In 1861 John Maxwell re-published the novel, renaming it *The Trail of the Serpent*. It then sold a thousand copies within a week (see Wolff, *Sensational Victorian*, 99).

A few thousand words are excised in the novel's second version, and the name of the villain changes from Ephraim East (in *Three Times Dead*) to Jabez North (see Waters, "Introduction", *The Trail of the Serpent*, vi; "A Note on the Text", *The Trail of the Serpent*, xxv; "My First Novel", *The Trail of the Serpent*, 415-427; and Wolff, 113 and 115).

The Trail of the Serpent was serialized again in 1864, in *The Halfpenny Journal*, Volume IV, from 1 August 1864 to 6 February 1865 (see "A Note on the Text", *The Trail of the Serpent*, xxv).

print for many years, (until the Modern Library Classics edition appeared in 2003). A further reason may be that some critics dismiss it as an apprentice novel in which Braddon was still learning her craft, or in which she too closely imitated the style of Dickens.²⁴¹ Amongst Braddon's work, *The Trail of the Serpent* is not alone in being neglected, however, as critical work on Braddon, although becoming more prevalent, has focused almost exclusively on *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *The Doctor's Wife*.

Chris Willis's "Afterword" to *The Trail of the Serpent* states that it is "probably the first detective novel in English", noting that "detective fiction barely existed" in 1860 (Willis, "Afterword", *The Trail of the Serpent*, 408).²⁴² Willis notes the probable influence on Peters's representation of the popular police casebooks published by Vidocq, the famous French detective. Similarly, Jabez North, the novel's villain, "was modelled on the type of criminal featured in melodrama – an evil mastermind with no redeeming features". Willis also speaks of the novel's "two parallel threads: North's criminal career and Peters's detective work. As North rises higher in the world, the pursuit intensifies and the reader becomes aware that Peters will inevitably track him down" (Willis, "Afterword", 409). While Willis singles out the characterization of Joseph Peters as the highlight of *The Trail of the Serpent*, she does not provide much commentary about how his mutism is depicted or how it affects the plot of the novel.

Christine Ferguson's article "Sensational Dependence: Prosthesis and Affect in Dickens and Braddon" offers the most thorough commentary available on how Joseph Peters's disability contributes to the themes and the action of *The Trail of the Serpent*. However, Ferguson's study focuses primarily on the so-called 'somatic' effects of sensation fiction. For the purposes of my own scholarship, the most valuable features of Ferguson's essay are her examination of the way in which Peters uses the "finger alphabet", and her discussion of how the novel supports the concept of collective "prosthesis".

In this chapter, therefore, I will consider the way that the novel challenges notions that the disabled are outside normative society and are incapable of work. I shall also look at

²⁴¹ Braddon herself later stated that her aim had been to "combine, as far as my powers allowed, the human interest and genial humour of Dickens with the plot-weaving of G.M.W. Reynolds" (Braddon, "My First Novel", *The Trail of the Serpent*, 422). Both Michael Diamond and Sarah Waters repeat this quote (see Diamond, *Victorian Sensation*, 191; note 8, and Waters, "Introduction", *The Trail of the Serpent*, xvi).

²⁴² Jennifer Carnell states that before *The Trail of the Serpent*, books in which detectives appeared were limited to memoirs written by detectives, and to Bucket's appearance in *Bleak House*. *The Trail of the Serpent* pre-dates *The Notting Hill Mystery* by Charles Felix (1862-3) and *The Leavenworth Case* by Anna Katharine Green (1878), as well as Wilkie Collins's detective novels (see Carnell, 237-38).

the innovative ways in which Braddon depicts finger spelling and gives it a central role to play in the narrative. I shall examine too how the novel represents issues related to mental illness, giving consideration to the novel's preoccupations with heredity, sociopathy, and social definitions of insanity; these issues are important in *The Trail of the Serpent* for their own sake, but also of interest because of the ways in which they prefigure Braddon's later discussions of these issues in *Lady Audley's Secret*. I will show that *The Trail of the Serpent* challenges many of the common Victorian attitudes toward physical and mental disability.

Mute men tell no tales: Joseph Peters, the mute detective.

Chris Willis has commented that with *The Trail of the Serpent* "Braddon gives what is arguably one of the most positive portrayals of a disabled person in Victorian fiction. Peters is unable to speak because of a childhood illness but, paradoxically, this supposed disability gives him an extra level of ability". Willis notes the sheer novelty of a Victorian novel that includes a disabled detective: "Peters is a rare creation. Even nowadays, few novels feature detectives with physical disabilities". Moreover, Peters's disability is neither a gimmick nor an unusual feature that the novel uses but fails to develop: Peters's "use of sign language is vital to the plot, enabling him to communicate secretly with his colleagues" (Willis, "Afterword", 411).

When Braddon wrote the first version of *The Trail of the Serpent*, she called the story *Three Times Dead, or The Secret of the Heath*. It seems that in this original version, the mute working-class detective Joseph Peters occupied a slightly less central narrative position. In her Introduction to *The Trail of the Serpent*, Sarah Waters notes that as Braddon rewrote *Three Times Dead*, she made changes that would foreground "the process of detection" and place a greater emphasis on Peters (Waters, "Introduction", *The Trail of the Serpent*, xvi). In *The Trail of the Serpent*, the novel's ostensible hero, Richard, is locked away in an asylum. He must be helped to freedom by Peters. Richard cannot be cleared of the murder of Montague Harding unless Peters is able to catch the genuine killer – thus, much of the story focuses on the detective's attempts to prove Jabez North's villainy and hunt him down.

Braddon's representation of Joseph Peters is affectionate; he is represented as respectable despite his poverty, and as a thoroughly capable man. Although the representation is occasionally comical, it is never condescending, and it is not difficult to regard Peters as the hero of the novel; he occupies a narrative centrality similar to the

position that Collins often awarded to his disabled heroes and heroines. Braddon's depiction of Peters differs from Collins's depictions of characters with disabilities, however, in that Braddon depicts Peters *at work*. In fact, perhaps the most interesting feature of Braddon's representation of Peters is that she considers the implications of Peters's disability on his ability to practice his chosen profession.

The background to Peters's disability.

Readers of *The Trail of the Serpent* are not offered much information about the background to the onset of Joseph Peters's mutism; very little explanation is given about its cause. Early in the novel we are told that Peters is not deaf, but that he became mute due to the after-effects of a serious illness during his youth. The very first mention of Peters tells of this childhood illness, and provides a physical description that may yield some clues about the cause of his mutism:

If you looked at his face for three hours together, you would in those three hours find only one thing in that face that was in any way out of the common – that one thing was the expression of the mouth.

It was a compressed mouth with thin lips, which tightened and drew themselves rigidly together when the man thought – and the man was almost always thinking: and this was not all, for when he thought most deeply the mouth shifted in a palpable degree to the left side of his face. This was the only thing remarkable about the man, except, indeed, that he was dumb but not deaf, having lost the use of his speech during a terrible illness which he had suffered in his youth (28-29).

Since the text fails to provide further details of the cause of Peters's illness, it seems that the reader is not expected to consider it very important; the text instead focuses interest on the way that mutism affects Peters's everyday life and job.

Despite this, it should be noted that Braddon was correct to suggest that someone may suffer from an illness that temporarily or permanently deprives them of the ability to speak. Moreover, such serious illnesses may fail to affect one's hearing; mutism need not have any link to hearing loss. Primary causes of the loss of the ability to speak (not linked to impaired hearing) include factors such as stroke, lesions and other damage to the frontal or temporal lobe, Broca's aphasia, brain tumours, and damage to the central nervous system. Such forms of neurological illness are the primary cause of speech loss; however, the ability to speak can also be lost due to accidents or illnesses involving the

throat, neck, tongue, or vocal chords, or due to weakness of muscles inside or around the mouth.²⁴³

The very brief description that we are given of Peters's illness, and the effects it has on his speech suggest that his condition might now be referred to as 'Acquired apraxia of speech'. This form of 'apraxia' manifests after one has already learnt to speak, and is usually caused by stroke, tumours in the brain, or other neurological illness.²⁴⁴

Previously acquired speech abilities are severely impaired or lost altogether, as the person with apraxia is prevented from being able to coordinate the parts of the brain and the parts of body needed to create speech. Since Peters's condition is said to have been caused by an illness, we might be able to imagine that he suffered from some form of 'brain fever' or another common but serious illness, such as meningitis, and that it caused or was accompanied by a stroke, since the novel makes repeated reference to the fact that one side of Peters's mouth moves very far to the left whenever he is deep in thought (29, 31). A stroke may twist the face and damage nerves. Otherwise, the most likely cause of an obvious misalignment of the mouth would be the jaw or mouth having suffered direct damage. *The Trail of the Serpent* does not make it clear whether Peters's illness attacked his neurological system. While it is possible that this detail about Peters's mouth could simply be an extravagance intended to add interest to his characterization, since it is provided immediately after he is mentioned as being dumb, it is likely that it hints toward the cause of his disability.

Peters as professional detective.

The Trail of the Serpent examines in some detail how Peters's mutism might hinder him professionally, but, somewhat unexpectedly, it also examines how it might work to his advantage. At the beginning of the novel Peters appears as a silent observer of the events surrounding Montague Harding's death and the apprehension of Richard

²⁴³ References for this information include: M. Selimoğlu, R. Akdağ, and I. Kirpınar, "A case of childhood shigellosis with mutism", and Jennifer Kwack and Martin L. Kutscher, "Medical Causes of Psychiatric Disease".

²⁴⁴ The website for the National Institute for Deafness and Other Communication Disorders explains "Apraxia of speech" (<<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/pages/apraxia.aspx>>): "Apraxia of speech, also known as verbal apraxia or dyspraxia, is a speech disorder in which a person has trouble saying what he or she wants to say correctly and consistently. It is not due to weakness or paralysis of the speech muscles (the muscles of the face, tongue, and lips) ... Acquired apraxia of speech can affect a person at any age... It is caused by damage to the parts of the brain that are involved in speaking... The disorder may result from a stroke, head injury, tumor, or other illness affecting the brain. Acquired apraxia of speech may occur together with muscle weakness affecting speech production (dysarthria) or language difficulties caused by damage to the nervous system (aphasia)".

Marwood for his murder; Peters is present throughout the initial investigative process, but remains on the periphery in terms of influence. Although Peters has remarkable perspicuity, observing and understanding many clues that ultimately aid in discovering Montague Harding's true murderer, for much of the novel his disability means that his true worth is underestimated (by other members of the police force, and by the novel's villain). At the beginning of the novel, and for a significant period of time afterwards, Peters is underemployed: "Of very little account this scrub amongst the officials. His infirmity, they say, makes him scarcely worth his salt, though they admit that his industry is unfailing" (45). Despite Peters's hard work, and even though his detective skills are far superior to theirs, he is regarded as close to useless by higher ranking officers.

The unfairness of Peters's low position is further emphasised when it is revealed that the judge presiding over Richard's murder trial is almost completely deaf in one ear. The judge is unable to properly hear testimony or the pleas of defendants - yet is allowed to rule on matters of life and death. The judge's deafness is obvious to many in the courtroom, and *does* create a deficiency in his performance, yet he is considered too important for anyone to criticise (53). This detail seems to point toward injustices carried out by the courts, or to emphasise the fact that in this case, the law does not listen to Richard's statement that he is innocent, or properly consider the signs that he is not guilty. It is also ironic that while Peters is assumed by some to be deaf, he is not, while a judge who needs to conduct 'hearings' can only hear in one ear, a fact that presumably leads him to make one-sided or unbalanced judgments. This ironic detail also points out the hypocrisy of not employing someone at a level that truly rewards their talents and ability (for reasons that stem from ableism and classism), when high-ranking officials turn in inferior work.

But in the rest of *The Trail of the Serpent* Braddon shows the reader how Peters's mutism – as well as the compensating abilities he has acquired after having become disabled - actually *aids* him in his profession as detective. It becomes apparent that Peters's inability to communicate orally is relatively unimportant. Because he retains the ability to hear, he can still collect and process information. Meanwhile, his mutism has no bearing on his cognitive abilities, such as his ability to detect clues, his reasoning capacities, and his instinct. In one remarkable scene, Peters's mutism actually helps him when his disability causes the criminal, Jabez North, to let down his guard and reveal self-incriminating information in front of Peters: Jabez wrongly assumes that

Peters is deaf as well as mute, and has no inkling that a deaf or deaf-mute man could be a detective. While Jabez does not actually reveal his involvement in the murder of Montague Harding, Peters overhears him making arrogant remarks during a conversation, and witnesses the brutal way that he treats his ex-lover. This behaviour sparks Peters's initial suspicion of him (37-38).

Further assumptions that others make about Peters due to his disability actually help him to rise professionally. Although Peters is underemployed by the police force, other officers speak candidly about cases in front of him, since it is assumed that "he won't talk": he is unlikely to reveal secrets to others. Due to his mutism and his working-class, shabby appearance, Peters is continually underestimated by others and seen as no danger to anyone. This works to his advantage: by virtue of seeming so nondescript, Peters is able to be present at key moments and to pick up vital pieces of information.²⁴⁵

There are other unexpected advantages to the communicative methods that Peters adopts instead of oral speech. Peters compensates for his mutism by communicating with friends and colleagues via sign language – especially finger spelling. *The Trail of the Serpent* represents finger spelling as having definite advantages in specific circumstances. In various set pieces, sign and finger spelling allows Peters to pass important information to others *instantly* (yet soundlessly) or *from some distance, without being seen* or *without being understood* by criminals or any others he wishes to leave out of the communicative loop. Peters is able to limit the comprehension of his messages to those who are on his side or who have been tutored in finger spelling and sign by himself; there are few others who will understand his signing.

The first such example of the use of finger spelling appears when Richard is in the dock for murder and is likely to be sentenced to hang. Richard's lawyer seems unable to defend him, so Peters has an inspired thought: Richard should "sham mad" in order to avoid prison and a possible death sentence. If sent instead to an asylum, Richard will gain time and have some hope of finally escaping injustice. Peters signs the instruction to "sham mad" to Richard across the courtroom; Richard understands it and follows suit. No one else in the courtroom notices Peters's hand gestures, so the excitement shown by Peters as Richard responds to the finger signing leads them to believe that Peters is merely an odd and disruptive man; it also seems evident that even if they did notice his

²⁴⁵ Here we might see a precursor to twentieth-century detectives such as Miss Marple: Miss Marple is able to wander around observing and speaking to suspects in criminal cases because she appears to be a harmless elderly woman. It was to become a common trope in detective fiction that a detective either needed to be a master of disguise or to have such an ordinary appearance that he was easily overlooked.

hand gestures, they would be unlikely to understand them (56). In *The Trail of the Serpent* sign therefore functions like a ‘secret code’ that proves to be vital to Peters’s detective work, almost always being interpreted correctly by his allies, but remaining beyond the understanding or beyond the notice of his enemies or of the general public. Peters emerges as an especially effective detective because he is not only being able to ‘read’ the important ‘signs’ provided by clues and by bodily behaviour, but because he is also effective at *creating* ‘signs’ that convey information.

It is unknown, and perhaps unknowable, why Braddon decided to focus her novel around a mute detective. Jennifer Carnell has explained that the figure of “the dumb witness” had been an important and frequent “device in Gothic melodrama”. Such characters from the stage might have provided some inspiration for Braddon’s characterization of Peters, but these figures are of course quite different than the idea of a “dumb detective”,²⁴⁶ an idea that Carnell recognizes as “distinctly unusual” (Carnell, *The Literary Lives*, 240). Whatever Braddon’s inspiration for creating a mute detective, she certainly appears to depict the Victorian manual alphabet in an accurate and detailed way. *The Trail of the Serpent* often narrates as Peters’s messages are spelt out letter by letter; the narrative sometimes even describes the signs for each letter or sound. An example is given very early in the text, soon after we meet Peters:

Richard watched the dirty alphabet.
First, two grimy fingers laid flat upon the dirty palm, N. next, the tip of the grimy forefinger of the right hand upon the tip of the grimy third finger of the left hand, O; the next letter is T, and the man snaps his fingers – the word is finished, NOT (*The Trail of the Serpent*, 29).²⁴⁷

In perhaps a less scientifically accurate fashion, the novel also suggests that finger spelling and sign are so precise that Peters can come across as communicating in cockney slang. The narrator registers when Peters signs “hinfant” instead of “infant”,

²⁴⁶ Braddon was an actress before becoming a writer, so it is highly probable that she would have seen or acted in plays that featured such characters. Carnell’s biography of Braddon provides an almost exhaustive list of the plays that Braddon appeared in.

²⁴⁷ Christine Ferguson suggests that the finger alphabet used by Peters probably “refers to BSL (British Sign Language) style finger spelling” (Ferguson, “Sensational Dependence: Prosthesis and Affect”, 9). Further investigation suggests this is correct. Braddon is describing the *finger-spelling* that was only one component of British sign language. Modern British Sign Language (BSL) evolves in part from the British sign language used in the nineteenth century. Perusal of the modern finger-spelling signs listed on one website shows them to be exactly the same as those described in *The Trail of the Serpent*. See <<http://www.aspxdesign.co.uk/bsl.htm>>.

Fingerspelling can be used when there is no accepted sign for a particular word, or when the signer does not know the appropriate sign; it can also be used as an alternative when the word has a sign. In some instances spelling out the word *is* the accepted sign for that word. Sign language as a whole incorporates not only fingerspelling but also conceptual signs which stand for entire words.

when he cuts ‘h’s off words, and when he uses street slang such as “cove” (see 102, 264).²⁴⁸

While it remains possible that Braddon includes so much detail about finger spelling merely for the sake of creating an unusual narrative, the fact that she depicts this variety of sign language so often and so positively throughout *The Trail of the Serpent* makes it appear that she accepts the value of sign language. As I have discussed in my chapter about Wilkie Collins’s *Hide and Seek*, sign language was often perceived to be an inferior language during the mid-nineteenth century, and as the century progressed, the supporters of ‘oral’ culture (who were strongly against sign and wished for the deaf to learn to speak) gained increasing support from educationalists, scientists, and bureaucrats. Sign was attacked because it was seen as encouraging the deaf or deaf-mute to remain ‘abnormal’, and it was regarded as unnecessary since the deaf and deaf-mute could (with great difficulty) be taught to speak. Despite the oralist argument that sign was a primitive communication medium, *The Trail of the Serpent* champions Peters’s use of sign. Not only does his signing serve as a crucial tool for detection, it is shown to be an expressive, understandable, precise, and rapid communication medium; a portrayal that runs counter to oralist arguments. Moreover, Peters, the novel’s most adept user of sign, *is actually the novel’s hero*, and his proficiency at reading clues/signs while carrying out detective work seems to be inextricably linked to his proficiency at *creating* signs.

Symbolic meanings of the novel’s use of sign and emphasis on the somatic.

The Trail of the Serpent’s representation of Peters’s use of sign and the finger alphabet appears to reach a reasonably high level of accuracy. However, this may not be the only purpose of the ubiquity of sign in the novel, as Peters’s signing and other characters’ respective successes or failures to interpret his signing seem to hold symbolic meaning. Like many other nineteenth-century novels, *The Trail of the Serpent* emphasises the importance of being able to ‘read’ bodily appearance and physical gestures. Reading the body was a particularly Victorian concern; many Victorians were fascinated by physiognomy and with interpreting physiological signs. Braddon later stated that with *Three Times Dead/ The Trail of the Serpent* she had deliberately set out to write a

²⁴⁸ This detail that Peters’s cockney accent shows up in his fingerspelling seems fanciful, but it may be possible, if he would merely have to spell ‘h-i-n-f-a-n-t’ instead of ‘i-n-f-a-n-t’. It may be that Braddon forgot herself when presenting Peters’s words as though he has a cockney accent. However, sign language does have various forms: British sign (BSL), American sign (ASL), and an Australian/New Zealand-based form of sign, as well as various manifestations in Europe. Moreover, within BSL, sometimes the sign used for a particular word differs, depending on which area one grew up in (see Jeffries, “Mixed Messages”).

“melodramatic” novel (Braddon, “My First Novel”, *The Trail of the Serpent*, 415-27). The fact that Braddon aimed for melodrama may go far toward explaining why the *The Trail of the Serpent* is replete with melodramatic physical gestures, scenes of miming and eavesdropping, and why it so strongly upholds the importance of ‘affect’. *The Trail of the Serpent*’s concern with affect and the importance of signs certainly makes it reminiscent of Gothic novels and of eighteenth-century novels of sentiment and sensibility.

Meanwhile, the interpretation of physiognomy and physical movements was to become exceedingly crucial to the new novel genre that was to develop. Whether entirely aware of it or not, Braddon, with *The Trail of the Serpent* was at the forefront of those who inaugurated and developed this genre. In *The Trail of the Serpent*, the detective Peters must correctly interpret other people’s blushes, inadvertent reactions, and facial expressions. He must be so adept at this that he can be certain of his interpretations, because whether his readings of others are instinctual or highly considered, he bases many of his judgements about what to do next on his readings of other people’s physiognomy and physiological responses. For example, Peters is able to tell very quickly that Richard did not murder his uncle by watching Richard’s shocked reaction to the news of the uncle’s death. He perceives correctly that Richard did not previously know that his uncle was dead; Richard therefore cannot be the murderer (*The Trail of the Serpent*, 29-30). To Peters, Richard’s expression and his subsequent actions are so telling that they outweigh the pieces of circumstantial evidence that appear to condemn him.

Thus, Peters is a master of reading people’s body language. It is unclear whether he always had an innate ability of this kind, or whether he has developed it because his mutism is an encouragement for him to sit quietly and to observe others. However, his observation skills are not only ideal for a detective, but an obvious compensation for his inability to speak; they are reminiscent of the way that Madonna becomes skilled at watching facial expressions and gestures in Collins’s *Hide and Seek*. While not deaf, Peters’s ability to be still and quiet creates the silence that allows him to focus on reading physical expression, and perhaps since he is not using one particular sense, he can direct more attention toward using another. While Peters is still able to hear, the *The Trail of the Serpent* brings to the readers’ attention that a large proportion of human communication takes place via body language and unconscious physical cues. Peters is able to use his skill at reading such cues to advance his career.

Past literary criticism of *The Trail of the Serpent* has only provided one particularly detailed or complex analysis of how Peters's disability adds to the meaning of *The Trail of the Serpent*. But this analysis by Christine Ferguson yields valuable insights; Ferguson points out that scholars studying the representation of disability in literary texts tend to focus on the "issue of the positive or the accurate fictional representation of disabled characters" (Ferguson, "Sensational Dependence", 1). This issue is in fact one of the major focus points of my thesis, as it is a major issue when disability is considered. However, like Ferguson, I believe that the 'positivity' or 'negativity' of representations of disability should not be the *only* focus of scholars who examine how disability is written about in the Victorian novel. With *The Trail of the Serpent* one can see that another factor that may complicate sensation fiction's representations of bodies and of disability is the historical context of mid-century controversies about the appropriate roles of fiction. The sensation novel appeared during a time of intense "debate about what the appropriate physical and cognitive responses to fiction might be" (Ferguson, 2), and sensation fiction figured prominently in these debates. Often, much of the perceived 'worth' or 'morality' of novels rested on what kinds of responses such novels were believed to induce in their readers – with "intellectual" responses considered preferable to "somatic" ones (Ferguson, 1-2).

But Ferguson also suggests that Victorian literary narratives function as "creative producers of, [sic] the reading body, enjoining their audience to, separately and simultaneously, see, hear, smell, taste, and touch the world with their characters". Therefore, when reading Victorian fiction we could ask "What sets of physical abilities, sensory aptitudes, and somatic experiences do differing fictional genres imagine as the requisites for their extra-textual audience's, and intra-textual characters', interface with text?" (Ferguson, 1).

This is indeed a viewpoint that can add another dimension to our reading of Joseph Peters; if we consider Peters's signing and the way he also engages others in signing and detection, his actions and role take on another dimension. Ferguson suggests that Peters's characterization can be read as upholding the value of parts of the body and of somatically-based forms of communication and expression. She notes that Peters's degree of disability is lessened because he surrounds himself with friends and colleagues who supplement his physical abilities. For example, Peters cannot 'speak' orally, but he adopts 'Slosby' (also known as 'Slosh'). Although his adoption of Slosby has a basis in altruism, Peters admits that he hopes that one day Slosby might act as his 'voice' in the

world: “I don’t look upon that hinfant as a hinfant. I looks upon him as a voice” (102; see also Ferguson, 14). Slosby acts as a kind of prosthesis²⁴⁹ to Peters. As a child he is often able to infiltrate places where Peters cannot go, and he is able to carry out some forms of detective work better than Peters can because of his ability to speak. For example, Slosby gets a job as Richard’s attendant in the lunatic asylum (where he conveys to Richard the plan to help him escape), and obtains a position as ‘tiger’ in the establishment of the Count de Marolles. Slosby successfully adopts various roles and mimics various voices. Just as Peters benefits from the fact that no one expects a mute man to be a detective, Slosby benefits from the fact that no one expects a child to be one.

Ferguson also notes the valuable assistance that the Left-Handed Smasher gives to Peters, suggesting that while Peters makes great use of his *eyes* while observing things around him, and great use of his *hands* as he implements sign language, he lacks a powerful “torso”. The Smasher supplies him with the brawn which proves to be a useful element of detective work (Ferguson, 13). Late in the novel, the Smasher knocks down Jabez North (disguised as the Count de Marolles), wounding him seriously enough that he cannot leave the country for some days. This allows Peters and his men enough time to catch Jabez as he attempts to escape via boat (*The Trail of the Serpent*, 343-44).

Given that historically, the detective novel began to focus on the efforts of a “lone genius” detective (such as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot), it is interesting that such an early detective novel features a team of detectives; even though Peters remains by far the most effective detective, the plot does not focus only on Peters’s detective work. Instead, suggests Christine Ferguson, *The Trail of the Serpent* displays a positive attitude toward teamwork that may be interpreted as a celebration of “prosthetic collectivity”, and it is apparent that this collectivity works as a corrective to Jabez North’s pride in being a totally independent, ‘self-made man’. As Ferguson notes, Slosby’s “voice combines with Peters’s eye and the Smasher’s fists to form a healthy and fully-functioning prosthetic culture” which “defies the rhetoric” of individualism; this collective effort demonstrates that there is nothing morally superior or intrinsically valuable about doing everything on your own (Ferguson, 14).

Ferguson’s reading seems viable and matches many of my own conclusions about the novel. I would therefore suggest that *The Trail of the Serpent* should not be read simply as a lurid melodrama. Neither is the integration of descriptions of sign language into the

²⁴⁹ I interpret a ‘prosthesis’ rather widely, as being an additional appendage or aid to a person. In this case, the prosthesis is not an artificial instrument or object, but a person who works with the disabled subject.

plot a mere gimmick, but an important part of the plot of detection. At the same time, the use of sign adds to the novel's veiled criticism of Victorian society's near-deification of the 'self-made man', and Peters's readiness to accept help from his 'deputy' detectives works as a corrective to his own tendency toward diligence and what could otherwise become an overemphasis on independence.

Ferguson goes even further in her analysis, suggesting that *The Trail of the Serpent*'s emphasis on the power of human collectivity, on the value of combining the power of various senses (a form of 'synaesthesia'),²⁵⁰ and on the value of body parts reimagines the strategies that characters in the novel and that the novel's readers must use "to access knowledge", and that it destabilizes "assessments about the role of the body in producing, sensing, and interpreting meaning" (Ferguson, 8). By advocating "for a synaesthetic and prosthetic model of reading the world", it challenges how the Victorians usually regarded fiction, as it threatens to render irrelevant the boundaries between the epistemologies of 'realist' fiction and sensational or melodramatic fiction (see Ferguson, 8).

Interestingly, *The Trail of the Serpent*'s advocacy of teamwork and undermining of "the division between different modes of sensory registration" (Ferguson, 18) leads the novel to prefigure one of the most important current concerns in contemporary disability theory. Recent disability theory has stressed the benefits of encouraging *positive views of 'dependence' and 'interdependence'* rather than viewing a person's need for help as 'dependency' and registering this as something undesirable. This observation is important, since it is when we regard a disabled person's reliance on another or their need for support as having negative connotations that we begin to view disabled people as pitiful, as lacking something, or as being in need of 'repair'. Instead, forms of 'dependence' can be presented in terms that frame them as involving mutual *inter-dependency* and teamwork. Despite being one hundred and fifty years old, *The Trail of the Serpent*'s representation of disability can be recognized as progressive, since its plot and message is one of normalizing "deviant, diverse, and often explicitly dependent" bodies and of diversifying "the bodily sites and signs of sentience" (Ferguson, 21) – such as, for example, suggesting that Peters can 'think' and 'speak' with his fingers. In its representation of the usefulness and naturalness of sign language, *The Trail of the*

²⁵⁰ Ferguson glosses 'synaesthesia' as "the blending of apparently discrete forms of sensation and expression" (Ferguson, 18).

Serpent also shows strong similarities with ideas advanced by many modern-day disability theorists and by advocates for the deaf.

The disabled man's capability.

Throughout history the concept of disability has often been strongly aligned with unemployment or the inability to work. This association would have been strong during the mid-Victorian period, with many disabled people either spending most of their time in the home, or, if in poverty, living in a workhouse or perhaps begging on the street. However, *The Trail of the Serpent* shows a man who is disabled fully engaging in work. Peters's success at reasoning and communication works to negate the idea that those who are disabled cannot offer or obtain professionally useful skills. *The Trail of the Serpent* even seems to suggest that a mute man would be the perfect candidate to become a great detective: his personal situation might encourage him to continually observe people's faces and scrutinise their actions; he would also be unlikely to 'give away' what he is thinking. Peters certainly subverts reader expectations in *The Trail of the Serpent*, as when it comes to practicing a profession or to carrying out difficult tasks, he emerges as the *most able* character in the novel.

Events in the novel make it obvious that Peters's abilities to pick up communicative cues and to communicate effectively are far superior to the abilities of many of the other characters. For example, the left-handed Smasher's lack of perceptiveness and low ability to process information are demonstrated by the difficulty he encounters when trying to follow Peters's fingerspelling. The Smasher claims that he cannot tell Peters's "p's from his b's, or his w's from his x's, let alone his vowels" (366).²⁵¹ The Smasher's rejection of the clarity and usefulness of Peters's signing parallels other disparaging comments he makes about Peters's ability: he seems unwilling to believe in Peters's ability as a detective, because of his mutism. While Peters's team of amateur detectives wait to apprehend Jabez North, the Smasher suggests that Peters is wasting time having signed conversations with people (366) and twice states that Peters is not "up to his

²⁵¹ The Smasher's inability to follow rapid fingerspelling seems intended to suggest his lack of patience or some cognitive slowness (perhaps, as a boxer, he has been hit in the head). It is reminiscent of Zachary Thorpe's struggle to sign correctly to Madonna Blyth; this detail may therefore hint at Braddon's being influenced by Collins's earlier novel. However, this difficulty with comprehending sign or signing properly may also, whether deliberately or inadvertently, fit with the fact that fingerspelling is harder to read than to sign. One recent study discovered that it is much easier to fingerspell proficiently than to view and understand fingerspelling. See L.E. Shipgood and T.R. Pring, "The difficulties of learning fingerspelling: an experimental investigation with hearing adult learners".

business” (see 368 and 372). But his failure to fully believe in Peters seems to be dispelled by the end of the novel.²⁵²

Richard, however, responds very positively to Peters’s use of the finger alphabet. From early on it is apparent that Richard understands it, and he is one of the most intelligent, eloquent and social characters in the novel. Despite this, Richard lacks self-awareness, does not observe “men and manners” (25) very closely, and is careless in his interactions with others. Throughout the novel, however, he develops more perceptive ability: he becomes more like Peters, and this is presented as desirable. It may be no coincidence that this growth in his perceptiveness may be a consequence of his having been very quiet and isolated in the asylum, not having had many people to speak to. This reminds one of how Peters’s mutism seems to encourage his perceptiveness; the novel therefore seems to suggest that quiet observation of the world aids one’s comprehension of others.

Although Peters is aided by several assistants, he is always presented as capable and active; the narrator never comments on his disability in a negative way or asks us to pity Peters. Meanwhile, Peters only once speaks explicitly about any inconvenience caused by his disability, explaining that “Not being so fortunate as to have a voice, you know, it comes awkward with strangers” (247). Yet, in the instance he is describing, he does make himself quite easily understood to the stranger he approaches. Peters accepts help from Slosby and from several of Richard Marwood’s friends, but he does so for pragmatic reasons. His creation of a team of amateur detectives reflects the difficulty involved in locating and catching a villain who operates internationally and who uses disguise, rather than reflecting that he lacks professional ability. At the end of the novel, when Jabez is finally caught, it is clear that nearly every important gain celebrated by the ‘detectives’ resulted from Peters’s careful observations and planning.²⁵³

It would not be an overstatement to say that Peters actually emerges as the hero of this novel. Peters not only appears to be highly capable, but that as the novel progresses, he settles into a highly normalized domestic life and gains the ‘rewards’ frequently given to the hero of a story. He becomes a foster father, then succeeds professionally and gains a

²⁵² Peters’s superior, Mr. Jinks, also disparages Peters’s use of the finger alphabet. It is unclear whether he disparages it because he cannot understand it, or whether he does not even try to follow it because he does not approve of it; either way, he tells Peters not to sign so quickly: “you must do it a little slower, if you want me to understand” (29).

²⁵³ Some examples of Peters’s astute realizations and decisions include his initial identification of Richard’s innocence; his decision to tell Richard to “sham mad”; his plan to help Richard escape from the asylum; his identification of Jabez as a person of interest; his utilization of Slosby, and his realization of the means by which Jabez might escape England.

‘promotion’ to the post of private detective on a comfortable salary. He also finds a wife, Kuppins (404) - despite saying at the start of the novel that he sees himself as a bachelor type. While no great romance with Kuppins is depicted, Kuppins and Peters seem suited to each other. Their union implicitly negates the view that disabled people should not marry or would not be desirable partners. Peters’s ascension to the position of paterfamilias in a comfortably middle-class family not only reflects his centrality as the hero of the novel, but this domesticity also makes him appear a highly ‘normative’ character.

While the novel’s first mention of Peters emphasises his ‘remarkability’ and while some parts of his characterization make him seem slightly eccentric, he always appears to be stable and well-adjusted; in fact, perhaps more so than any other character in the novel. He is immediately presented as being highly intelligent, since he is the only one who recognises Richard’s innocence. Reader sympathies are likely to align with Peters right away, as readers presumably want Richard to escape punishment. Peters also has morals: he values honesty, dislikes violence, and wants justice to prevail in the murder case. He is also, quite easily, the most diligent of any of the characters in the novel. When we consider that Richard is irresponsible, a spendthrift, and often drunk, that Valerie is vengeful and prepared to commit murder, that Jabez’s brother Jim is also a drunkard, that the Left-Handed Smasher is over-violent and unintelligent, that Gus dresses crazily and is prone to irresponsibility and exaggeration, that Jabez is sociopathic, and that Slosby, a ‘good’ character, is almost *too* eager to catch and punish criminals, one can easily reach the conclusion that Peters is actually the most ‘normal’ – or at least the most socially adjusted - of all the characters in *The Trail of the Serpent*, even though, outwardly, he might seem the most aberrant. Peters is sane, sober, gainfully employed, and his actions have virtuous motivations; he is therefore presented as though he is a role model, with his disability not detracting from this position in any way.

Jabez’s sociopathy.

While *The Trail of the Serpent* presents the novel’s outwardly most ‘aberrant’ character as actually its most intelligent and mentally and socially balanced, it also creates a situation where precisely the opposite thing occurs, via its lurid representation of Jabez North. Jabez is an outwardly respectable schoolmaster whose drive to succeed socially and economically actually connotes his underlying sociopathy. In its representation of Jabez, *The Trail of the Serpent* asks questions relating to the causes of

sociopathic behaviour: is sociopathy hereditary, or is it something that resides only in the individual? Alternatively, can a character's sociopathy be blamed purely on the society that surrounds them? The novel's exploration of whether sociopathy is something that can be read by others, and how it should be interpreted, provides a correlation with the exploration of signs and reading centered around Peters's characterization. Moreover, the characterization of Jabez can be interpreted as a trial run for Braddon's later representation of Lady Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*, a connection that has been overlooked by previous criticism.

The Trail of the Serpent engages quite enthusiastically with social anxieties about mental illness; in fact, the novel announces an interest in mental illness on its very first page. As the narrator sets the scene, introducing the town of Slopperton and mentioning the dangerous banks of the Slosby, they suggest that the town's bad weather encourages the residents of Slopperton to believe themselves so wretched that they should go mad or kill themselves (5-6).²⁵⁴ In these same introductory sentences, the narrator warns the novel's readers that the human mind is "a critical instrument" that can easily "get out of order" (6). While *The Trail of the Serpent* does not originally appear to be a novel about mental illness, it nevertheless mentions such a concern very early on, while sending a sinister message about despair and suicide. This narrative interest in mental illness is later manifested more fully in detailed scenes set in a lunatic asylum and also becomes more apparent as the novel begins to follow the career of Jabez North, the sociopathic orphan.

Jabez appears as a melodramatic, even a 'Gothic' villain. Nevertheless, *The Trail of the Serpent* provides a revealing and convincing psychological portrait of Jabez: the motivations for his pathological actions are explained and the reader is provided with enough details about his childhood and youth to understand some of the factors that may have led to his sociopathy. At the beginning of the novel, Jabez appears to the people of Slopperton to be a poor but honest, hard-working, respectable young school teacher. He is good-looking, but seems to be an 'average' man rather than a remarkable one. Only a few pages on, however, it becomes apparent to the reader that Jabez is not only highly ambitious, but full of resentment and envy toward others; he is actually a mentally disturbed and very dangerous young man. At the end of the novel, Jabez kills himself, having caused great harm to many others, yet having failed to feel any remorse. His actions and mentality would now quite easily be identified as 'sociopathic', his

²⁵⁴ This seems like a nineteenth-century prefiguration of 'seasonal affective disorder'.

sociopathy being displayed in his lack of empathy for others and the fact that he is without conscience.²⁵⁵

Jabez's characterization raises serious questions about the source and the nature of sociopathic behaviour, and answers them in quite a complex fashion for a mid-nineteenth century text. In the twenty-first century we may believe that we now understand a great deal about sociopathy, yet it remains mysterious enough to retain its fascination. Reading *The Trail of the Serpent* allows us to see how a writer in the mid nineteenth-century understood this issue; Braddon was writing while the modern disciplines of psychology and psychiatry were still developing, and not yet entirely recognized as official and separate sciences and professions. Braddon's representation of Jabez North appeared before two of Dickens's highly celebrated representations of similarly deranged or evil characters: the monomaniacal social climber Bradley Headstone of *Our Mutual Friend*, and John Jasper of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. It is remarkable that some of the explanations that Braddon presents for Jabez's behaviour prefigure ideas that much more modern-day research has suggested about the origins of sociopathic behaviour.

One of the issues that Braddon explores throughout *The Trail of the Serpent* is whether Jabez's harmful mindset is a condition that is prompted by his environment and upbringing, or whether it is reliant on genetic history (or, in nineteenth-century terms, heredity). In the twenty-first century, various scientists and psychiatrists have begun to answer this question by tending to identify those people whose maladaptive behaviour is largely prompted by sociological factors as 'sociopaths', and those whose maladaptive behaviour seems to have a more neurological or biological source, as 'psychopaths'. This is, however, a slight generalization, as some scientists do not make a distinction between the two terms, and members of the public are likely to use the two terms interchangeably.

Numerous scientists have begun to argue that those individuals who seem inclined to anti-social forms of behaviour may lack certain neuro-transmitters (or even certain genes) that are present in most people and work to inhibit anti-social or highly self-centered behaviour. Some studies have suggested that sociopathic or psychopathic people may

²⁵⁵ Both sociopaths and psychopaths are characterized by a lack of empathy for others, lack of remorse, and by a sense of grandiosity. However, 'sociopathy' is most often characterized in psychiatric literature as being a personality disorder largely affected by negative factors in an individual's environment and upbringing. 'Psychopathy' is usually considered to be a different disorder, more influenced by genetic, inherited factors and abnormalities in neurological functioning. However, such distinctions remain fairly controversial.

suffer from imbalances in the brain that actually make them *unable* to experience feelings of empathy or to learn how to value others' individuality and emotions.

Braddon obviously did not have access to such writings, but it is apparent from *The Trail of the Serpent* that she, and other nineteenth-century writers and scientists had already begun to consider the roots of sociopathic behaviour. Bearing in mind the distinction that some modern scientists make between sociopathy and psychopathy, it is of interest that *The Trail of the Serpent* puts forward both genetic and environmental factors as causes of Jabez's behaviour. In the end, however, Braddon presents the environmental factors as outweighing the genetic factors discussed. This decision would seem to be in alignment with the Victorian belief in 'moral management', which stressed the ability to overcome one's past and hereditary influences.

While I have said that Braddon presents both aspects of the question, social and hereditary/biological, much of the information Braddon first presents about Jabez's history, current life, and motivations, is uncannily similar to what modern-day psychiatry believes about the causes of 'psychopathy'.²⁵⁶ Some mental health experts now lay much of the blame for anti-social behaviour on neurological problems that are often genetic. This suggestion would seem to diminish the anti-social person's responsibility for their behaviour, and position them as a prisoner to their biology. Interestingly, when Braddon's novel discusses Jabez's sociopathic behaviour, much of the discussion is already dominated by questions about the importance of 'inherited traits'.

The Trail of the Serpent features incidents and aspects of characterization that would seem to support the notion that traits of immorality, amorality or lack of empathy can be inherited from one's ancestors. Braddon appears to hold the view that one's behaviour has much to do with how one's biology and parentage has preconditioned one to act. The reader learns the history of Jabez North's father, the Marquis de Cevennes, who appears to be almost as cold-hearted, detached and Machiavellian as Jabez is. While a young man hiding in England (during the time that French aristocrats were persecuted), the Marquis became involved with a young woman. She became pregnant, but the young aristocrat disappeared, never making contact with her again (327-28, 333). At the beginning of the novel, Jabez, without having been aware of who his father is, is revealed to have repeated the actions of his father, having made a young woman pregnant and then shown disdain for her. When Jabez later reveals to the Marquis their familial relationship, the

²⁵⁶ Bearing in mind that some scientists, and perhaps some readers, may not make a distinction between 'sociopathy' and 'psychopathy', one may take some of these points to refer to some possible causes of 'sociopathy' as well.

Marquis is flippant and unfeeling, saying: “So, you are my son? Upon my word I thought all along you were something of that kind, for you are such a consummate villain” (333). Although the Marquis appears to understand Jabez’s behaviour as a form of ‘villainy’ (suggesting deliberate decisions to act anti-socially, rather than a biological inability to have a conscience), the Marquis sees himself as a villain, sees Jabez as a villain, and believes that this shared trait is a proof of their connection. He accepts the idea that even though Jabez has grown up apart from him, he is still influenced by his father via inherited traits – these traits must have their primarily basis in biology, since Jabez has not witnessed his father’s behaviour.

However, despite the similarities between Jabez’s behaviour and the behaviour of the Marquis de Cevennes, *The Trail of the Serpent* also appears to support the idea that even if one inherits a tendency toward antisocial behaviour, such a trait may still be resisted by an individual. For example, although Jabez’s twin brother Jim has character flaws such as alcoholism and laziness (which could be located a spectrum of anti-social behaviour), Jim does not deliberately hurt others, and he is capable of shame and remorse. He acts differently than Jabez does, despite having the same father. This suggests that, despite familial inheritances, an individual is always left with free will to choose between goodness or evil.

Meanwhile, Jabez’s son, Slosby²⁵⁷ does not become a criminal, but rather works to catch criminals. Jennifer Carnell explains that “With Slosby, Braddon shows the son of a hardened murderer becoming a detective, and so debunking the theories of inevitable heredity which were current at the time” (Carnell, 241). The fact that Slosby could have developed in either direction, the good or the bad, is demonstrated in the ambiguity of his having been washed in a river of filth as a baby: this could be a symbol of his genetic taint, or a symbol of a cleansing baptism. Even if Slosby carries inherited traits that incline him toward criminality, they are overcome by the influence of his environment: since Slosby is brought up by the honest and (mostly) law-abiding Joseph Peters, he becomes more like Peters.

The Trail of the Serpent’s interest in biological heredity is also displayed via the questions it asks about the accuracy of phrenological knowledge and the limitations of reading people’s physiognomy. The novel’s discussion of phrenology ties to the debate about the source of Jabez’s villainy, while *The Trail of the Serpent*’s questioning of the

²⁵⁷ The narrator and characters within the story sometimes refer to Slosby as ‘Slosby’. However, I will refer to this character only as ‘Slosby’, in order to distinguish him from the river ‘Slosby’ that appears in the novel.

usefulness of physiognomy as a 'scientific' tool to analyse or reveal character appears somewhat contradictory. While Joseph Peters successfully reads body language and gestures, *The Trail of the Serpent* nevertheless reflects an uncertainty about the legitimacy or the accuracy of physiognomic knowledge. The accuracy and scientific utility of reading physiognomy was debated at the time of Braddon's writing of *The Trail of the Serpent*. Jabez North's visage does and does not reveal his ancestry, does and does not say a great deal about his character. Jabez is unusually good-looking, with delicate features and light colouring: an appearance that may at first seem incongruous, as these looks are bestowed on a man who at first, seems to be a mere school-teacher, a "drudge" (8-9). Yet, true to general Victorian stereotypes, he has inherited such delicate looks because he *is*, in fact, aristocratic by birth (7, 332).

Jabez's looks help him to gain and maintain the good opinion of Slopperton, its citizens generally holding the opinion that he is a "good young man". The novel's description of him as "pious" is juxtaposed with its description of him as being "rather a handsome young man" with a "very fine head". Jabez's looks therefore simultaneously mislead and reveal. The narrator mentions the positive effects of Jabez's "fine head of fair curly hair" and "very beautiful blue eyes", but slyly undercuts these impressions by stating that "it was a pity" that the eyes "had a shifting way with them", and "it was a pity" that his head "shelved off on either side of the locality where prejudiced people place the organ of conscientiousness" (7).

With this last comment, the novel moves into the field of phrenology. The narrator continues, stating that "a professor of phrenology" once visited Slopperton and (unexpectedly) stated that Jabez's skull showed a "case of deficiency in the entire moral region" which he had never seen before, except in the case of "a very distinguished criminal, who invited a friend to dinner and murdered him" (7). The people of Slopperton reject the phrenologist's reading of Jabez, wanting to believe in the goodness of the young man. Having told this story, the narrator ironically suggests that only "prejudiced" people would believe that a person's skull shape reveals anything of their character. Braddon plays an amusing, yet serious, game with phrenology: even though phrenology was already regarded by many as old-fashioned and unscientific by the time of *The Trail of the Serpent*, in this case, the phrenologist actually tells the truth about Jabez North.

Once Jabez leaves England, he succeeds as a businessman. People are prepared to believe that he is aristocratic because of his 'noble' appearance, and they invest in his

business because his good looks and charm make him appear benevolent and trustworthy. Jabez successfully manipulates and swindles people because of his sociopathic tendencies, aided in these machinations by his pleasant appearance. Yet, all the while, his physiognomy and skull shape could betray his darker nature to those who look more closely.²⁵⁸

Despite the truthfulness of *phrenology* in this instance, it appears that Jabez's *physiognomy* is a much less reliable indicator of whether he is good-natured or not. It seems that the general aspects of Jabez's appearance cannot obviously denote 'goodness' or 'badness', since his twin brother Jim looks almost exactly like him, yet is almost entirely his moral opposite (83-84). But the novel complicates its message about physiognomy again, since Jim states that even though Jabez, ostensibly, looks exactly like Jim - "handsome" and gentlemanly - there is nevertheless something about his face that hints at unpleasantness: "I can't say it's a face I much care about. There's something under – something behind the curtain" (89). It also turns out that there *is* a physical difference between Jabez and Jim that proves important: Jabez's facial scar. It is Jabez's forehead scar that finally makes Peters realise that the body he saw on the heath could not be that of Jabez (but was in fact Jim's) since it lacked the scar. Jabez's scar is of course a symbolic marker, another sign that must be read, highly suggestive of his status as murderer – in this particular case, murderer of his own brother.

While phrenology has long been debunked as unscientific and now also has connotations of eugenics, the phrenologist's interest in Jabez's skull shape is nevertheless interesting in the light of the fact that modern scientists have recently begun to gather results suggestive of the idea that people identified as sociopathic or psychopathic often do have issues with some brain functions. Recent research has suggested that sociopaths or psychopaths may have deficient functioning in the orbitofrontal cortex of the brain, and in the amygdala. The amygdala produces responses to stress, for example, helping a subject recognize signs of fear in another person. When a healthy person receives the message that their actions are inducing fear, they will generally stop those actions. But a person with damage to the amygdala will either not recognise expressions of fear or sadness, or will recognise them but not care about these

²⁵⁸ *The Trail of the Serpent* also engages with the language of blindness, employing metaphors which suggest that society, and even justice, is often blind to the truth. Suggestive discussions of blindness take place primarily within the chapters relating to "Blind Peter". This symbolism has already been discussed by Christine Ferguson (see Ferguson, "Sensational Dependence", 10-11).

responses.²⁵⁹ Therefore, despite the scientific inaccuracy of phrenology, it is nevertheless interesting that the phrenologist points out that Jabez's skull shape might suggest not merely something unusual about his character, but something unusual about his *brain*, which might in turn affect his character: the phrenologist states that the way Jabez's head "shelves" off suggests that he lacks "conscientiousness", and that there is something strange about Jabez's "entire moral region". Although not having quite the same implications as today's knowledge about sociopathy, the phrenologist's idea comes surprisingly close to stating that Jabez basically lacks "*conscience*" (7).

Apart from suggesting that Jabez may have an inherited taint, however, Braddon also locates some of the source of Jabez's pathology in society. For example, she suggests that the mere atmosphere and surroundings of Slopperton act upon people as a poison, infecting their minds and causing them to think of unhealthy things (5). However, not every inhabitant of Slopperton is affected by this equally. If the town 'poisons' Jabez, it does so because he is already inclined toward misanthropy, greed, resentment, and a wish for prestige. Jabez's susceptibility to poison from without (the social pressure he feels to prove himself) combines with his susceptibility to pressure from within (his own selfish or grandiose thoughts).

However, although the novel suggests that Jabez was born with sociopathic tendencies, the narrator's comments and Jabez's own words and behaviour also make it apparent that Jabez *deliberates* about whether to carry out antisocial and criminal behaviour, and then *chooses* to behave in such a way. From early in the novel, it is made clear that Jabez is deliberately two-faced and can switch his outward behaviours on and off: his "subdued fire" is visible in his eyes, but only "when he does not dream that any one is watching him" (10). It is likely that Victorians readers would have understood Jabez to be 'morally insane' (the closest idea the Victorians had to the concept of 'sociopathy').²⁶⁰

Early in *The Trail of the Serpent* the narrator claims, ambiguously, that Jabez is *not* influenced by the weather or by simple things such as whether he feels cold or not – leaving one to ponder which is worse: being over-sensitive to the weather, or having *no* response to the weather. However, the events that follow demonstrate that although Jabez may be naturally 'bad', he *is* also affected by his environment and by his difficult

²⁵⁹ See, for example, R.J.R. Blair, "Neurological Basis of Psychopathy", and Weber, Habel et al., "Structural Brain Abnormalities in Psychopaths – a Review". Other informative authors on this subject (with varying degrees of emphasis on a neurological basis for these disorders) include Simon Baron-Cohen, Martha Stout, and Robert D. Hare.

²⁶⁰ See pages 277-278 in my chapter on *Lady Audley's Secret* for a more extensive discussion of 'moral insanity'.

upbringing - but as the narrator facetiously states, “of course bad influences can only come to bad men” (6). Jabez cannot use his struggle with poverty and his having been a foundling as a totally convincing excuse for his sociopathy, as his brother Jim has lived in even more poverty-stricken conditions and never had the benefit of an education, yet Jim has not become sociopathic.

The growing manifestation of Jabez’s sociopathy is signified by his ingestion of various poisons and other fluids. After killing Allecompain Minor, who notices the blood on his hands from his murder of Montague Harding, Jabez washes his hands and then drinks the basin of bloody water in order to hide the evidence of his crime (22). Despite Jabez’s destruction of evidence, the traces of the murder remain as a kind of poison within him – a parallel to the teachings of physiognomy that suggested that past actions always remain as potentially observable traces on the outside of the body. Later in the novel, Jabez’s evil personality begins to overflow its banks and he begins to ‘poison’ other people, in the same way that the ‘Sloshy’ is represented as a noxious river that continually overflows its banks and eats people up (32).²⁶¹

While Jabez’s sociopathy obviously creates melodrama and excitement in *The Trail of the Serpent*, he is not a one-dimensional villain. He is affected by social forces such as his poverty, his lack of knowledge about his parentage, and his probable illegitimacy. Jabez’s anti-social behaviour almost appears to grow out of the extreme pressure he places on himself to succeed; an idea that comes dangerously close to suggesting that his behaviour is simply a pathological, less civil-minded version of the idea of self-help that was routinely upheld as a noble aspiration throughout the Victorian period. One could consider Jabez’s role in *The Trail of the Serpent* to be a parody of the ‘self-made man’ or to show the danger of any extreme version of individualism; Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help* had been published in the previous year.²⁶²

It appears that in *The Trail of the Serpent* Braddon questions and tries to assess the accuracy of various forms of Victorian science/pseudo-scientific belief. Although the pseudo-scientific practices of phrenology and attempting to read countenances were slightly old-fashioned by the 1860s, and, in the novel, do not appear to be able to explain Jabez’s sociopathy, they provide more answers than any other form of science known to Braddon. Braddon seems to accept the notion that traces of one’s character and

²⁶¹ The ‘Sloshy’ may be a symbol of evil in society. It could also be read as symbolizing the role that people felt melodramatic novels played in society. However, it was not until slightly later that critics began to compare the sensation novel to a kind of poison or infection.

²⁶² Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* was published in 1859 by John Murray (publishers) and was hugely popular.

psychological processes may show on one's face, and certainly that life experiences may affect someone's physical appearance.

The major difference between the modern-day understanding of sociopathy and the understanding that Braddon seems to have of it is the relative weight awarded to the biological and environmental explanations of sociopathy. *The Trail of the Serpent* appears to suggest that despite the fact that one can inherit a disposition toward anti-social behaviour, and despite the fact that the development of such a disposition can be exacerbated by one's environment, whether one fully develops a sociopathic worldview and acts on it is a choice made by the individual. Rather than concluding that a person's character is completely predetermined by their genetic inheritance and ancestry, *or* totally determined by their environment, Braddon comes to a very 'moral' conclusion about the sources of amoral or sociopathic behaviour. Whilst modern neuroscience actually implies some diminishment of the sociopath's responsibility for their anti-social behaviour, arguing that the sociopath may have *little or no control* over it because they literally have no conscience and cannot understand certain concepts, Braddon stresses the individual's responsibility for deciding how they will act and what they will become – biology is powerful, but can be resisted. The novel is very 'Victorian' in this regard, reflective of the fact that it was written in a period that stressed the importance of self-management. The readers may derive some pleasure from Jabez's escapades, but he is nevertheless shown to be very destructive.

The question of how sociopathy develops is troubled even further by Braddon via the fact although Joseph Peters is unswervingly good, it is possible to read his character as a flip-side to the characterization of Jabez North. Although one man is good and the other evil, the two men function as *doppelgängers*; in some ways, their behaviour and aims are similar. Joseph Peters works hard in order to accomplish a socially-approved form of self-help. Peters works his way up from the position of "grub" to being a more respected police officer, and finally becomes wealthy enough to retire from the force altogether. Although Peters serves Richard whole-heartedly, it cannot be denied that he is ambitious and that his professional efforts are in some ways self-serving. Yet he is admirable, since he improves his social status purely through his own skill, diligence, and determination, and often in the face of a lack of appreciation from others. Jabez also engages in self-help, but a sociopathic, extreme form of it: self-help without empathy or regard for others.

It therefore appears that Braddon juxtaposes these two characters not only to create a great detective plot, but in order to criticise the Victorian idea that the self-made man was always admirable. *The Trail of the Serpent* complicates the value of self-help by suggesting that the desire to work one's way up socially and to become more successful does not always guarantee virtue, and in fact, is not incompatible with becoming sociopathic if the individual pursues their goals in ways that needlessly harm others. Jabez North has goals that are similar to those of Peters: securing his own social and financial advancement. He also starts the novel in a similar position to Peters: in some poverty, and in a position in which he is not as respected as he desires and which does not fully utilise his intelligence. But Jabez becomes frustrated by hard work and wishes to make sudden gains in fortune. The only way to do this seems to be by engaging in deceptive or criminal acts. In contrast, although Peters subverts the law when he suggests that Richard escape 'justice' by 'shamming mad', and helps Richard escape from an asylum, Peters generally remains on the right side of the law. Most significantly, his social rise does not involve directly harming or disregarding others.

Yet, both characters deceive others, either actively or passively. Jabez acts as the innocent and virtuous gentleman, when he is not. Peters also puts on an 'act' when he allows people to believe him to be deaf, or when he acts as though he is ignorant of certain situations or uninvolved in them, so that he can collect further information. Both characters also employ disguise to aid themselves. Jabez impersonates a French aristocrat and operates a very successful business - despite not being able to prove his ancestry,²⁶³ and Peters also dons a disguise later in the novel (although only in order to serve the law). The representation of both characters focuses on their employment of language and gesture: Jabez learns certain gestures in order to appear noble, and becomes a master of elocution and languages, while Peters actually profits from knowing finger spelling. But the intent behind Jabez's development of language skills is to convince others that he is not English, while Peters's methods of communication are used for good causes.

Peters does eventually profit monetarily from his actions, but this is acceptable because of the intent behind his actions is to secure justice for others and to improve his own lot via honest means, rather than to profit from deceit. Jabez, however, is entirely dishonest and wants instant gratification. The ultimate aims of their self-aggrandization

²⁶³ One wonders whether Jabez North may have influenced Anthony Trollope's creation of Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now*. Both live on the continent and begin business operations as shady bankers and investors.

also differ: while it appears that Jabez only wants wealth and power, Peters's desires are more in tune with the Victorian middle-class or working class ideal. He wants a wife, and a son to pass his knowledge on to, and his pecuniary desire remains within reason. Peters responds to poverty and disadvantage in a positive way, while Jabez responds in ways that harm society.²⁶⁴

Jabez's significance within Braddon's oeuvre becomes more apparent when one realises that the depiction of Jabez's sociopathic behaviour prefigures Braddon's more well-known portrayal of mental pathology in the villainous Lady Audley. Both Jabez and Lady Audley try to raise themselves up from nothing, and to some degree, both transcend their unfortunate pasts by becoming rich and comfortable. Just as Lady Audley first appears in *Lady Audley's Secret* as Lucy Graham, a respectable but very poor governess (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 5-8), Jabez North also works as a teacher of children, but is poor and feels unappreciated. Much as Lucy Graham does, he thinks of contracting an advantageous marriage. In retrospect, Braddon's creation of Jabez looks like a 'trial run' for Lady Audley's characterization.

Both characters make amoral choices in order to improve their social position. But one major difference between the two characters that is likely to profoundly affect a reader's estimation of their respective villainy is Lady Audley's gender. While Jabez is unlikely to secure anyone's sympathy, Lady Audley is likely to gain more sympathy from readers because she is, to some degree, driven toward negative actions by the limitations placed on her by her gender. She is deserted by her husband and has very few options for supporting herself or her child. She therefore begins a life of deception and villainy, making many bad decisions and committing immoral actions. However, she probably appears less sociopathic than does Jabez, first, because she often appears as a victim of her circumstances, and secondly because her negative actions are not always pre-meditated.

Lady Audley therefore seems a softened version of Jabez North, who embodies more calculated and deliberate evil. While Lady Audley believes that she has killed George Talboys, and later attempts to kill Robert Audley, she is nevertheless tormented by the memory of her attack on George, and agitated by the anticipation of hearing about Robert's death. She also never actually succeeds in killing anyone. Jabez, on the other

²⁶⁴ The moral or motivational similarities between the 'hero' detective and the 'villain' of a story continue in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*.

hand, commits at least four murders, including the ruthless killing of a small boy who is in his care.

Braddon's early portrayal of a sociopathic male has attracted much less commentary than her celebrated portrayal of Lady Audley. But even though the portrayal of Jabez is melodramatic, he too is a serious representation of a morally compromised individual, and, as with Lady Audley, it is unclear whether his anti-social actions are purely the result of environmental pressures and past neglect by society, or whether the character should rightly be seen as having inherited sociopathic tendencies or tendencies toward insanity. It is likely that the Victorians would have read both Jabez and Lady Audley as 'morally insane', even though in *Lady Audley's Secret* the question of Lady Audley's 'insanity' and culpability is more complicated, due to various social judgements about and limitations on women's behaviour. The reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* may not even believe Lady Audley's own claim that she is mad, let alone Robert Audley's claim that she is. *Lady Audley's Secret*, therefore, shows the potential dangers of women having limited access to chances of economic advancement and personal fulfilment, a topic which Braddon was to take even further in *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), with her portrayal of Olivia Arundel.

The fact that Braddon represented this kind of character at least three times, including as a male character in *The Trail of the Serpent*, suggests that she not only had an interest in 'insanity' in its relation to limitations on female behaviour, but that she also had a general interest in controversies related to insanity, such as the borderline between 'insane' behaviour and behaviour that was simply immoral and selfish, or not socially condoned. In these novels, Braddon explores the idea that someone could be morally insane, yet rational.

The Trail of the Serpent depicts what might happen to a person of talent, intelligence and ambition who is (or who feels) held back by their social position, and whose frustration and envy of others goes unchecked. Considering Jabez's sociopathy as having been encouraged by his environment, one could conclude that his original poverty acts as a kind of 'disability' in his life, preventing him (in his mind) from gaining access to a comfortable life by honest means. His sociopathy could also be viewed as a disability, not only because it is a mental disorder, but because it prevents him from acting in ways that are socially acceptable, safe to others, or ultimately, beneficial to himself.

Braddon's representation of Jabez is fascinating in itself, but even more so when considered in tandem with *Lady Audley's Secret*. It is significant that in her first novel, Braddon already represents sociopathy, shows an interest in mental illnesses, and examines how social deprivation might affect an individual's sense of morality. Much of *The Trail of the Serpent* revolves around the process of detecting the sociopath, and the social problem of how to deal with him.

'Obliged to go over the same ground for ever and ever': the ambiguous nature of lunatic asylums.

In another part of the novel, *The Trail of the Serpent's* concern with mental health and pathology extends to depicting life within a lunatic asylum. Apart from representing Jabez's sociopathy for horrifying effect, *The Trail of the Serpent* includes a subplot of some pathos. In this subplot the young man Richard Marwood is shut up in an insane asylum for nine years. Having been wrongly convicted of murder, Richard pretends to be mad²⁶⁵ in order to escape a prison sentence and probable execution. These sections of the novel draw attention to problematic factors in the recognition and diagnosis of insanity, as Richard's performance of 'madness' easily convinces the authorities watching him in the courtroom and even the doctors in the asylum, despite being entirely fake, merely based on obvious stereotypes of madness. The novel also paints a poignant picture of the mental torture endured by Richard as he faces the injustice of being wrongfully incarcerated (as a murderer and as a lunatic) and the stresses that accompany being kept in near isolation for several years. The poignancy of this depiction, however, is alleviated as the novel also includes more 'comic' scenes depicting some of the delusions and follies of various asylum inmates.

The two different avenues from which Braddon represents life in the lunatic asylum may at first seem jarring. After eight years of solitary confinement, Richard is finally allowed to mix with the other inmates, only to find that conversations with them are nonsensical. Various patients of the asylum, for example, harbour delusions that they are world leaders, famous aristocrats, or run large companies (211-18). This short section of the novel appears to be written from a comic perspective, yet with the intent of providing

²⁶⁵ In technical terms, Richard has to convince the court and doctors that he is 'insane', since that is the legal term that is used for 'madness'. It is proving 'insanity' that is part of the 'lunacy defence'. However, I will use the terms 'madness' and 'insanity' interchangeably since Peters's advice is to "sham mad" (the more informal term) and Richard performs what contemporaries would have understood to be the most stereotypical signs of madness.

insights into the mental conditions of typical inmates. At the very least, it may provide insight into how Braddon perceived such asylums.

When Richard is moved from solitary confinement into the section for less dangerous patients, he, like the other patients in this section, is allowed to wander in the asylum garden and to speak to whoever he chooses. The only restraint upon the inmates is that if their behaviour gets out of hand, they are told to go back inside. It appears that the patients generally obey such instructions (216). This description seems to be in keeping with contemporaneous descriptions of insane asylums, although possibly with private rather than public ones.

While the people that Richard encounters in the asylum do appear to suffer from obvious ‘lunacy’, the conversations they have amongst themselves reveal them to be harmless, and their keepers consider them to be “pretty safe” (216). It appears that none of the lunatics Richard sees in the garden are potentially violent; instead, they simply appear to be unable to look after themselves or to work. However, a reader might even reach a slightly different conclusion about the inmates, deciding that some of the inmates depicted might not be completely mad, but might simply be ‘eccentrics’. If so, these eccentrics might not necessarily be in need of professional supervision, but may have been placed in the asylum only because their families are embarrassed by them. The asylum doctor is depicted as being kind and respectful to the inmates (201-03); while this appears positive and perhaps ‘progressive’, the flip side of his leniency is that the doctor lets the inmates do and think as they wish; there is no attempt to correct their delusions. Thus, the asylum does not in fact ‘treat’ or ‘cure’ mental pathology. The inmates are likely to remain there permanently, unless they somehow cure themselves.

Therefore, in this section Braddon reveals what may be the strengths and the shortcomings of such asylums: asylums may be overpopulated with people who are not actually dangerous and who could be looked after at home by their families, or otherwise be accommodated in the community. We also have the example of Richard, who is not ‘insane’ at all, but is still regarded as such by the doctor, even after eight years of quiet behaviour. Meanwhile, the doctor’s attitude toward the inmates could be read as both positive and negative: he is kind to the inmates but appears to regard them as incurable, seemingly either a reflection that some mental illnesses remained mysterious to the Victorians, or that the asylum existed primarily to gather money from the inmates.

Apart from commenting upon Richard’s isolation, Braddon does not focus on any horrors of life in the asylum. The lunatics depicted are not deeply unhappy; they seem

well-adjusted to their situation and even happy in their delusions. The asylum inmates even feel sorry for one patient who suddenly recovers. The inmates regard themselves as being “very social” and as having established a fairly happy community within the walls (211). Thus the narrator of the novel comments: “these wretched people scarcely seem unhappy” (210), and, ironically, perhaps, given the novel’s emphasis on other forms of language and gesture, states “their language is not our language, nor their world our world ... Who can tell whether their folly might not perhaps be better than our wisdom?” (211). For the narrator the inmates are not necessarily to be pitied for suffering from mental illness, as they now bear no responsibilities and live in a state of blissful ignorance.

The Trail of the Serpent, therefore, does not include any examples of physical torture, sexual harassment, or obvious malpractice and corruption within the psychiatric profession. In this regard, it contrasts with Charles Reade’s later, more trenchant *Hard Cash* (1863). Nevertheless, it does depict some mental health professionals as inept, unable to distinguish real and fake insanity. There is also a sense of something forlorn about the asylum’s inmates, aided by the description of the asylum garden and its plants and trees as “languishing”, “gaunt”, “melancholy”, and “troubled and dishevelled” (210).

The narrator suggests that the most upsetting aspect of the situation is that Richard is trapped in the asylum when he should not be. For a mad person amongst the mad, an asylum may not be uncomfortable. But for a sane person to be left for a long time amongst the mad is a form of torture. The narrator comments upon the extreme loneliness that Richard feels during his time in solitary confinement, but it would also be difficult for Richard to socialise with the lunatics in the garden. Sympathy is built up for Richard as the narrator describes how Richard’s life is ruled by “monotony” for eight years (190), and that he has, at times, thought it would be better for him to die (191). After eight years of clinging to hope that he might be released or rescued, Richard gives up: “he fell ill. A strange illness ... Rather a dying out of the last light of hope, and an utter abandonment of himself to despair”. His despair causes him to stop talking unless he is asked questions (192), and he develops monomaniacal cognitive traits: “thinking of the bitterness of his fate ... till he had become, as it were, the slave of a dreadful habit of his mind, and was obliged to go over the same ground for ever and ever” (193). Braddon’s depiction of loneliness and hopelessness bringing on depression is not especially innovative, but it *is* sympathetic, and it reflects Victorian beliefs that some

forms of mental illness were caused by or accompanied by repetitive, obsessive thought and actions.

It is painfully apparent that although Richard is sane when he enters the asylum, he is in grave danger of *losing* his sanity simply by virtue of being in the asylum and going for eight years without having any sane person to speak to. However, Richard develops enough mental fortitude to survive, and despite the unfairness of the incarceration, Richard ultimately benefits from it: the quietness and solitude prompts him to become more thoughtful and more observant of others, and the gravity of the situation influences him to become less shallow.

The Trail of the Serpent depicts the dangers of unjust institutionalization in an understated way. Along with Collins's *The Woman in White*, it seems to be one of the very first sensation novels to feature a plot centered on the unjust incarceration of a character in a mental asylum. Such plots were later to become very common in sensation fiction, culminating in Reade's furious exposé of the asylum system in *Hard Cash*.

The Trail of the Serpent therefore represents mental illness and its attendant stigma from two different directions: instances of folly are comical and harmless, but the pathologically manipulative are extremely dangerous. The novel seems to attach some pathos to both forms of mental illness. The lunatics in the asylum suffer to some degree, due to their limited socialization. Meanwhile Jabez North, although deliberately 'evil' and detached from others, does suffer due to his sociopathy, because he is isolated from love and from any truly positive feeling. While society probably feels more pathos and concern for the lunatics in the asylum, these forms of lunacy can be rendered relatively benign. It is those with forms of pathology such as Jabez North has who society is unable to accommodate. The chaos and destruction caused by Jabez's madness eventually means that he must be excised from society.

Conclusion.

The Trail of the Serpent is not only unusual in its decision to feature a disabled hero, but even more so in the very positive support it expresses for Joseph Peters's use of sign language as a communicative medium. The novel's support for sign functions as part of its wider concern with the importance of the somatic, especially with correctly interpreting the somatic 'signs' we are presented with every day (in others' appearances and gestures). Somatically based forms of communication become very significant to the

novel's detective plot; in order to catch the murderer it becomes vital to read people's visages and gestures correctly.

Christine Ferguson explains that part of the reason behind Peters's professional success is that his methods of detection are "affective". He does not disregard clues presented to him by particular senses. Ferguson believes that Peters is more successful than the phrenologist that the novel mentions [and the other policemen] because he "does not rely on the 'the sight/knowledge dyad'", but considers "a dizzying array of competing visual signs and evidence", ranging from "anatomical markings, gestures, and nervous reactions to environmental stimuli" (Ferguson, 11).

The novel also depicts the social problems caused by Jabez North, a sociopathic criminal who evades detection for many years, despite there being physiological hints of his pathology. Meanwhile, another man is incarcerated as a killer and a madman instead of Jabez, because the courts are unable to distinguish between guilt and innocence and asylum officials are unable to distinguish between genuine and feigned madness. In the sections dealing with Jabez's sociopathy and criminal career, the novel appears to support the idea that physiognomy can reveal aspects of someone's character. It also appears to display a limited belief in phrenology: certainly, it utilizes phrenological ideas to enhance the parts of its plot focusing on criminality and detection. Braddon actually appears to have started a new genre with her publication of this novel.²⁶⁶ However, her novel of detection is in keeping with the spirit of the time, reflecting contemporaneous pseudo-scientific beliefs about physiology which suggested "that criminals could be identified by physical and cranial characteristics" (Carnell, 236).

The novel's reliance on the mute detective is, however, highly original and innovative, not paralleled by anything else in contemporaneous culture. Christine Ferguson has noted that although it may at first seem implausible that so many characters in *The Trail of the Serpent* could know sign language,²⁶⁷ the ubiquity of sign in the novel purposely emphasises the "embodied and affective nature of language" (Ferguson, 12). Peters communicates effectively with his fingers, and in fact, *The Trail of the Serpent* uses Peters's fingerspelling to demonstrate his intelligence, as the rapid motions of his fingers make apparent the rapidity of his intellect (see Ferguson, 13). His use of sign and

²⁶⁶ Carnell states that with *Three Times Dead/ The Trail of the Serpent* Braddon was "the first female to write a novel of crime and detection" (Carnell, 237).

²⁶⁷ It should be noted that it seems that Peters teaches finger spelling to some of these characters. Richard, of course, knows it already.

fingerspelling draws our attention to the fact that much of what we term 'communication' is not verbal, but is made up of sending and reading visual signs.

We cannot really know what prompted Braddon to create the character of a mute detective. It may be that she was affected by Collins's portrayal of Madonna in *Hide and Seek*: like *Hide and Seek*, *The Trail of the Serpent* is concerned with showing that sign is a perfectly serviceable communication medium and with demonstrating that someone who is mute could nevertheless be intelligent. The best clue may lie in the fact that immediately prior to her writing *The Trail of the Serpent*, Braddon was a provincial actress. It is possible that her portrayal of Peters was inspired by the deaf-mute characters who had appeared in Victorian melodramas: these characters were forced to depend on strong gestures to convey emotion. However, Braddon adds further elements to her novel, critiquing the way that the affective and gestural had been treated as inferior and clearly supporting the use of sign language.

The Trail of the Serpent's representation of sensory impairment also contains a symbolic meaning. Just as some critics have argued that Madonna's mutism in Wilkie Collins's *Hide and Seek* might be a commentary on the status of women – suggesting that they lacked a voice – Peters's mutism might be read as an allegory. Peters stands as a representation of innocent integrity and 'Justice', and his mutism is symbolic of the way that the truth (in Richard's murder case, and perhaps in the case of Jabez's past history) is continually suppressed, kept silent, or buried. Peters, a representative of justice, continually tries to 'speak' the truth about the case, but is interrupted by his superiors, or not listened to. The fact that only a few people understand Peters's use of sign correlates with the fact that only a small number of people correctly interpret or see the truth about the case. We see such a dynamic at work in Richard's trial scene, as Richard tries to speak the truth, exclaiming that he is "Not Guilty", only to encounter a deaf judge who cannot interpret his words correctly. Just as Peters, as a figure of justice, is kept silent, the Judge, who should dispense justice, *does not listen*. The metaphorical relations of words, hearing, sanity, and intelligence continues as Richard is closed up in an asylum, with nobody to talk to, words and their expression or suppression being linked to concepts of sanity.

Eventually, Richard even loses the will to speak, and becomes voluntarily mute – a condition that reflects his 'voiceless' position. Such a dynamic appears throughout the novel, with, for example, the killer Jabez North gagging a young child in order to prevent him from crying out as he is killed (22-23). 'Good' people continually try to speak the

truth in this novel, only to be acted against by ‘bad’ characters, or to meet obstacles caused by the law’s refusal to listen.

The Trail of the Serpent’s emphasis on bodily signs, bodily processes, and somatic or affective clues provides an early indication of ideas that were to become prevailing concerns in sensation fiction. Like Wilkie Collins’s work, *The Trail of the Serpent* focuses on the need to ‘read’ other people correctly by responding to their physiognomy and their body language, or by taking note of one’s somatic responses while in their presence. Meanwhile, since the shabby and unimpressive-looking Peters turns out to be a hero and a genius, while the handsome, aristocratic-looking Jabez turns out to be a murderer, *The Trail of the Serpent* also communicates another message that pervades the sensation novel genre: the truth is often hidden under misleading surface appearances.

The emphasis that later sensation fiction placed on the body and on bodily responses was often held by critics to be the hallmark of inferior, even immoral fiction. But with *The Trail of the Serpent*, Braddon almost makes such criticism irrelevant, as she renders somatic meanings critical to the novel’s plot and to solving the mystery. The narrative forces the reader to take note of clues that could be picked up by various senses. Some critics of the sensation novel also worried that if a novel aimed to prompt a bodily reaction in the reader, the reader’s responses would be merely visceral and by-pass any considered mental processing; the reader would then learn nothing of merit. However, with *The Trail of the Serpent*, Braddon shows that the realm of the body is not separate from the world of the mind: mental processing and cognition are reliant on sensory perception and can even be displayed via various means of the body. Moreover, while the novel often foregrounds the somatic, as one of the first ‘detective’ novels in English it can hardly be said to elide the cerebral, since detective novels are famous precisely for prompting readers to read carefully for clues, to make judgments about characters, and to piece together sequences of events. Through its emphasis on what the somatic can reveal, *The Trail of the Serpent* challenges what Victorian readers considered to be good forms or methods of reading, pointing out that there might be little difference between engaging the ‘intellect’ and engaging the ‘senses’.

Meanwhile, in the novel’s depiction of Joseph Peters, there is never a hint of pity – despite the fact that at this time, ‘pity’ was usually regarded as the most appropriate response to disability, with disability generally considered “a pathetic stigma” (Ferguson, 20). Although Peters is for many years treated with condescension by his ‘superiors’ in the police force because of his disability, their underestimation of his worth is revealed to

be a serious mistake. Apart from Peters's initial underemployment, Peters's mutism does not seem to affect his mood or his way of life very negatively, and the novel's depiction of him, his personality, and his use of sign, is overwhelmingly positive. It transpires that despite his so-called 'disabilities', Peters is the policeman *most capable* of solving the mystery and punishing the criminal acts at the centre of the novel. His proficiencies in both signing and in 'reading' people meanwhile suggest the benefits of combining various forms of knowledge acquisition. By the end of the novel, Peters is rewarded for his efforts, having deservedly gained a wife, a son, and a comfortable income. However, it should also be noted that although Peters achieves a great deal on his own, *The Trail of the Serpent* also adopts a positive attitude toward circumstances of interdependence and its relation to disability. This is a feature of the novel's plot that also resonates with disability studies today.

While the representation of Peters and his finger-spelling probably dominates *The Trail of the Serpent*, it is worth recognising that Braddon also engages with questions relating to mental illness, to conditions in mental asylums, and to the lunacy defence in murder trials. *The Trail of the Serpent* should also be recognized for Braddon's first attempt to depict some of the motivations of a mentally pathological character. In her representation of Jabez North, Braddon questions the idea of inherited tendencies, yet seems to admit the idea that if one's thoughts are evil, this cannot help but leave some traces, however minimal, on one's appearance – thus suggesting some value in physiognomy. Braddon's representation of Jabez is therefore unusual, as it draws on old-fashioned forms of science or pseudoscience, while also asking questions about sociopathy (or moral insanity) that are still asked today.

Since *The Trail of the Serpent* achieves so much, it is highly unfortunate that it has been almost entirely neglected by literary critics. *The Trail of the Serpent* shows that Braddon, along with Wilkie Collins, was more than capable of representing a disabled character in a realistic and positive way. Lastly, Braddon's representation of Jabez North is also particularly interesting not only on its own merits, but due to its appearing to be a preparatory study for Braddon's later depiction of Lady Audley.

LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET (1861-2):

“‘When you say I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way on the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me; and reproached me. and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and I *was mad!*’” (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 346).

In recent years, like Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* has become an increasingly popular focus of study by literary scholars and has emerged in the forefront of a Victorian alternative canon.²⁶⁸ In contradistinction with Victorian reviewers, who often voiced condemnation of the novel's self-interested anti-heroine, modern critics of *Lady Audley's Secret* almost invariably voice some sympathy for the plight of the main character, Lady Audley, and express understanding, if not support, for her actions. While characters in the text of Braddon's novel seek to convince others that Lady Audley's decisions to marry bigamously and to push her first husband down a well are the actions of either an evil woman or a woman tormented by hereditary insanity, modern critics conducting feminist-influenced readings have often interpreted Lady Audley's actions as feminine assertiveness, or as actions that Lady Audley is forced into by difficult circumstance. The major issue that most often seems to be at stake in critical interpretations of Braddon's novel is whether Lady Audley should be regarded as insane. Lady Audley actually claims for herself the designation of 'madwoman', but despite her assertions, many modern critics deny the accuracy of this interpretation, choosing instead to view society's application of the term 'madwoman' to Lady Audley as indicative of the means by which Victorian society classified and quarantined forms of female behaviour of which it did not approve. The basic argument of many such interpretations is that Lady Audley's actions always have rational explanations and are linked to obvious goals.

My own examination of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's portrayal of Lady Audley does not explicitly challenge these feminist readings of *Lady Audley's Secret*. In fact, I agree that despite the availability of other readings, it is most appropriate *not* to read Lady Audley

²⁶⁸ *Lady Audley's Secret* originally began serialization in the magazine *Robin Goodfellow*, but the magazine soon ceased publication. *Lady Audley's Secret* then continued in the *Sixpenny Magazine*. Later on, Braddon's novel was serialized again, with illustrations, in the *London Journal*. These details are provided by David Skilton in page xxiv of his edition of *Lady Audley's Secret*. They are also explained in King, "Sympathy as Subversion?: Reading *Lady Audley's Secret* in the Kitchen", 61-62. Much of the publication history of *Lady Audley's Secret* may be found at the website <<http://www.sensationpress.com/maryelizabethbraddonladyaudleyssecretimages.htm>>.

as insane, but rather to view her as someone who is punished for her non-conformity. However, I believe that there are further issues at stake within Braddon's novel, that the issue of Lady Audley's 'insanity' is not presented as a case having a clear 'yes' or 'no', and that, considering the scientific context of the novel, it is not so difficult to see why Lady Audley is so diagnosed. Rather, I believe that Braddon represents Lady Audley as a pseudo-madwoman not merely to challenge gender roles and the ways that society judged unconventional or assertive women, but to critique society's tendency to pathologize. In this regard, it shares a major interest and aim with the novels by Wilkie Collins that I have discussed in this thesis.

Lady Audley's Secret is not challenging merely because it points out the difficulties faced by poverty-stricken women or the risks faced by women who choose to be assertive. While Braddon's novel does bring up the issue of feminine insanity, the question is not merely whether Lady Audley is insane or not, but whether 'hereditary insanity' really exists. The novel also combats deterministic psychological theories by questioning whether individuals who are deemed at risk from hereditary insanity should devote time to worrying about it. In this regard, Braddon's novel can be seen to repeat some of the concerns present in Wilkie Collins's fictions: in both *Poor Miss Finch* and *Hide and Seek* Collins's narratives purposely ignore any social concerns that were commonly attached to the idea of people with sensory disabilities or with epilepsy marrying and having children. The narratives reject the idea that biological inheritances or differences must control someone's life. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* has similar concerns, but tackles the issue of mental or psychological difference, showing how Lady Audley's overconcern about the possibility of having inherited pathology from her mother overshadows her life, causing her to view it in a way that limits her choices and free will.

The novel also posits wider questions related to the reliability of the psychiatric profession, whether objective and reliable psychiatric diagnoses are in fact possible, and the othering directed toward those perceived to exhibit mental or behavioural difference. In this regard it clearly shares some of the concerns that had appeared in Collins's *The Dead Secret* and that were later to appear in *The Law and the Lady* (in society's responses to Dexter and to Valeria). The overarching message conveyed by *Lady Audley's Secret* is that diagnoses of mental conditions – whether those of men or women – are only ever *constructions, readings* built from an accumulation of details and observations: pieces of circumstantial evidence that may never be one hundred percent

accurate or convincing. Braddon's novel pre-figures many of the foundational concepts of modern-day disability theory, which questions the able-bodied/disabled binary, since Braddon focuses on the way that 'madness/insanity' is not immediately distinguishable or definable and does not have a solid essence. Rather, like many forms of physical, mental, and social 'disabilities' (or 'deformities'), it is *socially constructed*, formulated via discourse and often reliant on a wish to stigmatize, ostracize or control.

In my discussion of *Lady Audley's Secret* I shall examine some of the methods by which Braddon conveys such ideas via her representation of Lady Audley and the way that she situates Lady Audley within the discourse about madness which surrounds her. I also wish to consider this novel in the context of some of Braddon's other portrayals of physical and mental disability, especially *The Trail of the Serpent*, and, to a lesser extent, *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863). As I noted at the end of the previous chapter, the important similarities between *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Trail of the Serpent* have gone completely unmentioned by previous critics. Although Braddon's representation of Lady Audley is more complex than her portrayal of Jabez North, it is clear that in *Lady Audley's Secret* Braddon is again exploring some of the concerns dealt with in the previous novel.

The plot of *Lady Audley's Secret* is dominated by the Victorian fear of 'hereditary insanity'. In fact, anxiety about the insanity she may have inherited from her mother is *the presiding secret* that drives (or possibly excuses) almost all of Lady Audley's behaviour. The quote with which I began this section reveals starkly Lady Audley's intense fear that she has inherited her mother's madness and that it remains latent within her but has already become apparent during specific acts of non-normative behaviour. Lady Audley fears that she shall descend into complete madness, like her mother. But this issue is complicated. Not only is it unclear whether Lady Audley really has 'inherited' mental instability or a tendency toward dangerous behaviour, while Lady Audley claims that she lives on the borderline of sanity and madness, she also claims that she only crosses the line into acts of 'madness' when threatened and reproached by others. Can this really be 'madness' if it is partially controllable, or prompted by threatening circumstances? Braddon here returns to the issues that had been raised in *The Trail of the Serpent* of whether deviance resides in the individual or can be/is inherited from a parent/parents, and the degree to which society is actually to blame when someone turns to socially deviant behaviour or develops mental pathology. Is there such a thing as 'moral insanity'? Or is there only behaviour that is not socially sanctioned?

There are various reasons why Lady Audley might wish to refer to herself as someone who may have inherited madness. She may be read as sincere when she says that she has gone through life feeling terrified that madness will overtake her. However, one could argue that even if she has gone through life experiencing this fear, it is foolish to live incessantly worrying about or looking for something that may never appear – that Lady Audley should not have allowed herself to be so anxious about it. Moreover, readers may refuse, and sometimes have refused, to take Lady Audley's assertion of her fear of hereditary insanity at face value, given that by claiming to be a madwoman, she provides herself with an excuse for her antisocial acts. She pushes one husband down a well, attempts to burn another person alive, remarries bigamously, and lies to all those around her. Since, for much of the novel Lady Audley and other characters do not know that George Talboys is still alive, and Lady Audley does not know whether Robert Audley will survive the fire at the inn, Lady Audley faces the possibility that one day she could be tried for murder. The novel therefore alludes to the historical context of the importance of the insanity plea in cases of murder: a legal and psychiatric concept that Braddon had already worked into the plot of *The Trail of the Serpent*. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, if a murder case were to go ahead, it could be very useful for Lady Audley to put forward an insanity plea, since such a plea might result in a lighter punishment or help her avoid incarceration.

However, for much of the novel Lady Audley does not have a particular fear that her 'murder' of George Talboys or her bigamy shall be discovered. She appears reasonably confident that she has not left discoverable traces of her crimes. One might suppose, therefore, that rather than merely provide Lady Audley with a legal excuse for her actions, it is more important to Lady Audley that by regarding herself as a madwoman, she absolves herself from any moral blame for what she has done. There is some evidence in the novel to suggest that Lady Audley can only live with her conscience if she can convince herself that all of her morally dubious actions have been spur-of-the-moment, wild responses to her situation rather than the result of pre-meditated plans (as they actually almost always appear to be). Then, rather than being a deliberately conniving, evil, or harmful person, she is someone who is prone to panicking under stress and who is at the mercy of harmful promptings inflicted upon her by a force she cannot control.

It has been pointed out that in her creation of Lady Audley and her questioning of the concept of 'madness', Braddon took inspiration from, but amended, ideas used by Wilkie

Collins in *The Woman in White*. Collins's Laura Fairlie is also placed in an asylum when she should not be:

Collins and Braddon are each in different ways challenging the blonde child-wife stereotype, both probing the links between the confining contemporary constructions of femininity and of insanity. In *The Woman in White* derangement is the product of the way that Laura is manipulated as the result of her situation; in *Lady Audley's Secret* Lucy's 'latent insanity' is given as an explanation of her behaviour – she is bad because she is mad (Taylor, *In The Secret Theatre of Home*, 11).

Braddon was very strongly influenced by Collins, and acknowledged that influence.²⁶⁹

But Braddon creates a different construction of 'madness' than that achieved in *The Woman in White*. In Collins's novel, the villains of the novel simply lie about Laura Fairlie's mental state and substitute her for another woman, depriving her of her identity. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, a psychiatrist and the main male character Robert Audley suggest that being non-conformist and self-protecting is reason enough to be treated as insane. Braddon presents a psychiatrist who makes what seems to be a deliberate mistake: at the very least, he conflates a fear of Lady Audley's general disruptiveness with 'insanity', thus mixing moral judgments with scientific ones.

In *Lady Audley's Secret* Braddon begins to question the diagnostic methods of such doctors. However, she also responds to what was a widespread and growing fear at the time: the fear of hereditary insanity, a tendency or condition that mid-Victorian psychiatrists and doctors were increasingly trying to theorize and make the public aware of. It appears that either Braddon wanted to write a novel which showed the psychological effects such a fear might have on a person, or that she wrote the novel in order to comment on the pervasiveness of this fear. Sally Shuttleworth explains that "From the 1860s onward, medical emphasis on hereditary and latent insanity increased, as England's decline in economic prosperity and confidence was shadowed forth in the evolutionary pessimism of Maudsley and other post-Darwinian theorists" (Shuttleworth, "Preaching to the Nerves: Psychological Disorder", 200). It was suggested by doctors that many people harboured latent brain disease, and

The sensationalists, writing at a transitional period, drew on both these biologically deterministic theories of madness and on the theories of moral management of the earlier part of the century (Shuttleworth, "Preaching to the Nerves", 200).

²⁶⁹ In one interview, Braddon referred to Collins as "my literary father" (Joseph Hatton, "Miss Braddon at Home: A Sketch and an Interview", *London Society* 53 (January 1888), 28.

For those who believed in the possibility of the moral management of insanity, “insanity was not necessarily an inescapable biological given; it could be partial, and it could be cured”. Such an idea seemed to partially negate the threat posed by “hereditary insanity” and its “oppressive determinism”. On the other hand, the increasing belief within the psychiatric profession that almost anyone could become subject to insanity mean that “The threat of insanity hung over all, not merely the biologically selected few” (Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 200-01).

Modern critical interpretations of Lady Audley’s behaviour.

Although Lucy Audley explains herself as being a ‘madwoman’ and various male characters in Braddon’s novel also voice this opinion, many modern critics of *Lady Audley’s Secret* express discontent with such a reading of Lady Audley’s behaviour. While the argument is primarily put forward by feminist critics, it has become a critical commonplace to side with the view that Lady Audley’s acts are not those of a madwoman. Critic after critic has stated this view. However, in recent years a smaller number of critics have recognised either that Braddon’s novel is ambiguous in this regard, or have made very qualified comments about her mental state, such as that “Lady Audley has (or appears to have) ‘moral insanity due to an implied hereditary weakness from her mother’” (see Andrew Maunder, “Mapping the Victorian Sensation Novel: Some Recent and Future Trends”, 9). After saying this, in the same article Maunder seems to agree with Jill Matus’s suggestion that the discourse of madness in *Lady Audley’s Secret* “is a blatant cover-up”, allowing “historically specific issues of class and power to be represented instead as timeless and universal matters of female biology” (Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, 334; qtd in Maunder, “Mapping”, 17).

Various critics who have defended Lady Audley’s behaviour or who have simply pointed out that it is not the behaviour of a madwoman, have chosen to focus on her poverty-stricken background as a contributing cause of her behaviour. They point out that once her husband has abandoned her and she is left with a young child to support, Helen Maldon/Lucy Audley²⁷⁰ has very few avenues she can take. A woman born into the middle class, her opportunities of earning money are slight, with the only reputable jobs available being governessing or teaching. These critics have recognized that her decision to leave her father and son and go out to work is reasonable, perhaps even

²⁷⁰ From this point on, I will almost always refer to this character as Lucy Audley or Lady Audley.

completely necessary. Jennifer Carnell states: “it seemed as though the only option in the 1850s was to be a governess, which many took, and the actress, which only a few dared”. Meanwhile, at the time Braddon wrote the novel, there was great public awareness of “the surplus women problem” (Carnell, *The Literary Lives*, 17). Surplus women were usually those young women who had not been married and who found themselves in the difficult position of not having a husband to rely upon for financial support. In *Lady Audley’s Secret* Helen Maldon/Lady Audley has been married, but when her husband disappears, she finds herself in the same position as a single woman – possibly in a worse position since she also has a child. Moreover, even while her husband was with her, they did not live comfortably, as his father had disinherited him. Jan Schipper, for example, argues for the reasonableness of Lady Audley’s decision to leave her father and son: not only has she had to endure “a life of poverty”, but she also has to deal with an “alcoholic father” and an “insane and absent mother” (Schipper, *Becoming Frauds*, 37).

Other critics have pointed out that George Talboys “has the freedom and culture’s permission to abandon his family, as long as he is seeking financial success” (Schipper, 39), and that when Lucy goes out to earn money, it is possible to read her as only mimicking “her husband’s earlier desertion when she too abandons her family” (Schipper, 41). These critics are of course, pointing out that if we think it is reasonable for George Talboys to leave his family in order to pursue money, but condemn Lucy for taking similar action, we buy into a sexist double standard.

One could defend Lady Audley’s actions even further than this. Although she does leave her family behind, give out news of her own death (under her original name, Helen Talboys) and start a new position under a new name, she continues to keep track of her son and her father and to send money to them. Neither is there any indication of her planning ahead of time to commit bigamy to catch a second, richer husband: the thought only crosses her mind when Sir Michael Audley begins to pay attention to her, and some indication is provided that at the time of this new marriage, she assumes that George Talboys has probably died.

Lady Audley’s use of violence may be the most convincing suggestion of her ‘madness’. However, it is important to note, as some critics have, that Lady Audley *does not do anything violent until she is threatened* (Schipper, 44; my emphasis). There is also a strong case to be made that she is merely looking after herself and acting in self-defence when others try to threaten or expose her. Hence, there has recently been a general critical consensus that Lady Audley’s actions are defensible, and that the fact

they can be defended proves that she is not in fact mad. Since her actions display rational thinking, they are not the acts of a madwoman. Perhaps the most forthright (and influential) assertion of this conclusion is provided by Elaine Showalter, who states that “Lady Audley’s secret is that she is *sane*, and moreover, representative” (Showalter, “Desperate Remedies”, 4).

David Skilton makes similar claims about Lady Audley’s mentality in his edition of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, stating that “Lady Audley seems to me never to be misled as to the nature of reality, which, on the contrary, she manipulates most efficiently when circumstances demand” (Skilton, “Introduction”, xiii). Skilton feels that “Most modern readers will agree with the diagnosis of Doctor Mosgrove when he first discusses her case, and says that ‘there is no evidence of madness in anything she has done’” (*Lady Audley’s Secret*, 377; referred to in Skilton’s “Introduction”, xv-xvi).

These comments are fairly representative of recent criticism, yet there remain cases in which critics have seemed unsure of what the reader should think about Lady Audley’s mental state. These critics may not lack sympathy for Lady Audley, but register the difficulty of comprehending the novel’s mixed messages. For example, while apparently supporting Jill Matus’s rejection of Lady Audley’s ‘insanity’ from any *medical* point of view (Matus instead supports the idea of Lady Audley’s “badness” and anger), Andrew Maunder points out that the novel nevertheless seems to forward the point of view that Lady Audley “pollutes” the family estate” (Maunder, “Mapping”, 10). Of course, this does not in itself prove Lady Audley’s ‘madness’, but rather demonstrates her class transgression. However, Maunder feels that the inclusion of such ideas in Braddon’s novel causes it to transmit “unstable and ambiguous moral messages” about its heroine (Maunder, *ibid.*, 10). Maunder expresses his certainty that sensation novelists like Braddon were “putting on trial [...] mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood”, but appears unsure what he should conclude about Lady Audley’s sanity, (Maunder, *ibid.*, 11-12).

The most frequent conclusions about Braddon’s novel – and sensation novels in general - in recent feminist-influenced analyses are that the life stories of sensation heroines like Lady Audley castigate “a society that failed to value women’s intelligence or abilities” (Schipper, 96), and that “sensation novels indirectly voiced women’s ambitions for individuality and power” (see Schroeder, *Feminine Sensationalism*, 87). It should be noted, however, that these late twentieth- century and early twenty-first century readings of the novel that sympathize with Lady Audley generally express views

that are quite different from how Victorian critics interpreted Braddon's heroine: very few Victorian critics (at least, middle-class ones) sympathized with Lady Audley in the slightest degree.

Victorian readings of Lady Audley.

In 1863 an anonymous reviewer reviewed *Lady Audley's Secret* for *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* (Volume 68). This reviewer regards Lady Audley as the primary "culprit" of every form of conflict in the novel, even stating that "the culprit is hateful, odious, fiendish, and, as we almost hope, a maniac" ("The Popular Novels of the Year", *Fraser's Magazine*, 257). Interestingly, the reviewer's words "we almost hope" signal some doubt as to whether Lady Audley really *is* a maniac. The reviewer's doubt becomes more apparent as they continue: "Lady Audley is forced in self-defence to make a full confession, in which she states that the 'secret of her life' is hereditary insanity; that at times she is mad, and that those times she is not aware of what she is doing" ("The Popular Novels of the Year", 258). But the reviewer simply does not believe this explanation for Lady Audley's behaviour.

There undoubtedly are persons subject to fits of temporary insanity, but these are not usually such calm, gentle, soft lovely beings as Lady Audley. There is a little too much 'method in her madness'. She is nothing more than a cold, calculating, heartless woman, with a beautiful face and enchanting manners; she never loses her presence of mind, and she never forgets to save herself at the expense of others. It is only when driven to bay – rendered desperate by conflicting circumstances, that she turns and rends the obstacle in her path; and whether it be her direst enemy, or her best friend, she will, at all hazards, remove the impediment to her own ease and comfort .
... To save appearances, however, Lady Audley is taken at her word, and hurried away to France, where she is confined for the rest of her life in a *maison de santé* ("The Popular Novels of the Year", 259).

The reviewer dismisses Braddon's plot-line by suggesting that "Miss Braddon appears to be of the opinion that everybody is more or less mad, and that there are moments in all our lives when we are scarcely responsible for our own actions" ("The Popular Novels of the Year", 258).

What emerges from the *Fraser's Magazine* review is the suggestion that Lady Audley is not a madwoman at all and that the assertion of her madness is only made for reasons of convenience. This surprising review evidences that such readings of *Lady Audley's Secret* have not appeared only in recent years, but that this interpretation was quite within the reach of a Victorian reviewer. This may also suggest that the idea that Lady

Audley might not be mad at all may not have been a totally foreign concept to general readers; perhaps some astute, sympathetic (or, suspicious) members of the reading public might also have determined that Lady Audley is not a madwoman.

But any similarities between the views expressed by the reviewer in *Fraser's Magazine* and those of modern day critics stop there, as the *Fraser's* reviewer feels no sympathy for Lady Audley at all. For them, Lady Audley's madness is simply a ruse on her part and a plot mechanism employed by Braddon. Despite this, the reviewer does not regard the culture of 'madness' evoked by the male characters to control Lady Audley as being in any way sinister or repressive. One consequence of the reviewer's disbelief in Lady Audley's madness is that they can only instead regard her as evil. The reviewer therefore expresses admiration for Robert Audley in his pursuit of Lady Audley (258) and sympathy for Sir Michael, claiming that Sir Michael is "driven" from Lady Audley "in despair" (257). The reviewer feels no sorrow when Lady Audley dies in the Belgian asylum, noting that "though she may be a fine conception, she is scarcely a human being, and consequently, we care little about her; we take no pleasure in her success, feel no pity for her in her final disgrace" ("The Popular Novels of the Year", 259).

The reviewer does, however, seem to register one dangerous implication if we regard Lady Audley as 'mad': as I have pointed out, such a label would provide Lady Audley with an excuse for her behaviour, since falling victim to uncontrollable tendencies is slightly more 'acceptable' than deliberately acting dangerously or viciously. The reviewer may therefore reject Lady Audley's 'madness' simply because he does not want her to be excused. But an even more worrying concern noted by the reviewer is that madness could be considered an exonerating factor in cases of murder: if someone who plans their actions ahead of time can still be perceived as acting 'madly' in the heat of the moment, "then, no doubt, most of the murders daily committed are only the acts of lunatics, and many innocent creatures have been hung unjustly" ("The Popular Novels of the Year", 259).

It is also clear that the reviewer's antagonism is chiefly provoked by what he sees as Lady Audley's lack of remorse ("The Popular Novels of the Year", 257). While the reviewer astutely recognizes some of the more 'political' ramifications of the novel (the possible real-life legal implications of conceptions about insanity), their statements are nevertheless in line with the tendency of many Victorian reviews to focus primarily on the *moral ideas* suggested by a novel rather than on other elements of the text.

Meanwhile, another anonymous reviewer, in the *Spectator*, while not necessarily claiming that Lady Audley is sane, suggests that Lady Audley's being 'mad' is a useful plot function because it awards the character the liberty to engage in almost any action.

Madness may intensify any quality, courage, or hate, or jealousy, or wickedness, and she [Braddon] made Lady Audley mad. Thenceforward she was released from the irksome regime of the probable ... Probability becomes unnecessary, vraisemblance a burden, naturalness a mistake in art ... no-one except Dr. Forbes Winslow knows what is natural in a patient with intermittent lunacy ("Madness in Novels", *Spectator*, 3 February 1866, 135; qtd. in Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 10).

While the reviewer for the *Spectator* seems to express scepticism as to the verisimilitude of Braddon's representation of a madwoman, they do not dismiss the claim that Lady Audley is mad.

Meanwhile, the critic W. Fraser Rae does not necessarily find fault with Lady Audley for being insane, but for being alarmingly *aberrant*. Rae judges Lady Audley to be "unnatural" because, in his opinion, only a woman with nerves of steel could openly oppose Robert Audley. But (in an argument that seems contradictory), Rae also criticises Braddon's characterization of Lady Audley, because, in his view, she is never presented in a way that suggests she would actually be tough enough to oppose Robert: the novel originally presents Lady Audley as being sweet. Because of such apparent discrepancies, Rae judged that Braddon is guilty of inconsistencies of characterization: Lady Audley's "manner and her appearances are always in contrast with her conduct".²⁷¹ Rae does not realize what this apparent discrepancy may suggest about how Lady Audley is forced to act if she wishes to survive. The judgement he makes is again primarily moral: that "Lady Audley is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel" (Rae, "Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon", 186; also qtd. in Skilton, "Introduction", xviii). For Rae, not only does Lady Audley's "monstrosity" suggest her problematic mentality, but the people who would like a book such as *Lady Audley's Secret* must themselves have "ill-regulated minds". Rae, showing a disdain for the working class, then associates readers

²⁷¹ Rae's commentary brings to mind an issue mentioned by Sally Shuttleworth. Shuttleworth explains that 'realist' fiction of the Victorian period set great importance on obeying "the formal rules of coherence and continuity, which were themselves predicated on specific notions of psychology ... the realist novel, with its cumulative movement toward greater social understanding and self-awareness, established a literature whose keynotes were continuity and responsibility. Gradual, cumulative action revealed the continuity of the psyche; all actions were explicable ... The self, such novels suggested, was a unified entity" (Shuttleworth, "Preaching to the Nerves", 195). Although it can be argued that Lady Audley is given consistent motivation for all of her actions, Rae's judgment that 'inconsistency' could be seen as an artistic flaw does suggest that sensation novels often placed less value placed on 'unified' characterization and rational behavior.

with such ill-regulated minds and low “mental capacity” with people who are “the lowest in the social scale”, whom the novel was apparently “written for” (Rae, “Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon”, 204; also qtd. in Skilton, “Introduction”, xxi, and in Schipper, 36).

Neither does the well-known critic Henry Mansel make explicit statements about Lady Audley’s ‘madness’. However, it seems clear to Mansel that the novel does not side with Lady Audley. Mansel is generally critical of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, yet his negative opinion is mitigated because he locates a moral in the novel: he believes that Braddon has a poor opinion of Lady Audley, and he expresses a conviction that “Lady Audley is meant to be detested” (see Mansel, “Sensation Novels”, 492-93; qtd. in Maunder, *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction, Volume I*, 41-42; also qtd. in Schroeder, 100).²⁷²

These Victorian reviewers who took exception to *Lady Audley’s Secret* were disturbed by the idea that a disruptive force could emerge from within the Victorian home. The reviews are generally written from a position that identifies with the male characters in the novel, as evidenced by the alarm with which they regard any disruption to the lives or authority of the male figures. It is also likely that these reviewers found Lady Audley particularly disturbing because her conventionally beautiful physical appearance suggests that she should be good and respectable. As Katherine Montwieler discusses in her analysis of *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s use of Victorian tropes of womanhood, “Lady Audley’s beauty is centered in her infantilism and her girlishness”; these traits were conventionally considered attractive in females. So, “Because her beauty is so conventional, George Talboys, Sir Michael Audley, and Robert Audley *all* find her attractive” (Montwieler, “Marketing Sensation”, 49). Jessica Cox also argues that by the time Collins and Braddon became popular, the Victorian reading public had become used to descriptions that concentrated on a literary heroine’s physiognomy, and particular features were considered to reveal certain things about the heroine (Cox, “Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the Depiction of the Heroine”, 109). “Physiognomical description ... was a way of suggesting without proclaiming, of imputing intelligence, caprice, and even sexuality to heroines without indecorous explicitness” (Fahnestock, “Physiognomy and the Conventions of Heroine Description”, 1980, 326; qtd in Cox, “Reading Faces”, 109). While Victorian novelists did begin to write about “irregularly featured heroines” (ibid., 330; qtd. in Cox, “Reading Faces”, 109), it was almost always only such heroines of

²⁷² In the same review, Mansel regards such novels as “an efflorescence, as an eruption indicative of the state of health of the body in which they appear ... by no means favourable symptoms of the conditions of the body of society” (Mansel, “Sensation Novels”, *Quarterly Review*, 512).

irregular features who were “capable of irregular conduct” (ibid., 331; qtd. in Cox, “Reading Faces”, 109).²⁷³ Jessica Cox notes that Wilkie Collins both follows and subverts such conventions. In Collins’ work, the “pale, blue-eyed” heroine is always “passive”, and only the “dark-haired” [or red-haired] women are “masculine” and assertive (see Cox, “Reading Faces”, 113). With such conventions having been established, it is likely to have disturbed readers to find that a conventionally beautiful female character could engage in deceitful and criminal acts.

However, our understanding of how Victorian readers are likely to have responded to *Lady Audley’s Secret* may need to undergo some adjustment, because in an article titled “Sympathy as Subversion?: Reading *Lady Audley’s Secret* in the Kitchen”, Andrew King warns against reading *Lady Audley’s Secret* as being necessarily or ‘inherently’ subversive simply because it elicited outraged responses from Victorian critics. As King points out, the Victorian critics who are often cited as having been upset by the novel (the same critics I have cited) were from the upper middle classes, and writing for the “high-status press”. In King’s interesting article he points out that *Lady Audley’s Secret* was also serialized in the less prestigious penny press magazine *The London Journal*, and he argues that readers of *Lady Audley’s Secret* in *The London Journal* are likely to have taken quite a different viewpoint toward the novel, and toward Lady Audley in particular, than did the reviewers in more upmarket periodicals. King notes that *The London Journal* and other magazines from the penny press often featured stories in which a woman – even a mad woman – is abandoned by a man and therefore forced into crime and into prison (King, “Sympathy as Subversion?”, 72). He explains that “Lady Audley’s incarceration in the *maison de santé* and her rapid death from a *maladie de langueur* would have arrived to readers in the massmarket zone as a glyph for a whole series of imprisonments of women that demand a sympathetic response”. According to King, “virtually all female imprisonments are unjust in penny fiction, virtually all caused by male wickedness. According to the moral binarism that prevails, Robert Audley should therefore be cast in the role of villain” (King, 74). Other novels in the penny press that featured similar story-lines of abandonment “insistently suggest” that they must be read via the mode of “sympathy”. Therefore it is likely that readers who encountered *Lady Audley’s Secret* in *The London Journal* would have instinctively read Lady Audley as the wronged party, rather than as a dangerous, disruptive, or ‘mad’ woman (King, 70).

²⁷³ One such example would be Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. Marian looks unconventional and acts unconventionally. Another Collins heroine, Valeria Macallan, who describes herself as not being a conventional beauty, also acts in ways that would not be considered typically feminine.

King's article seems to be the only recent analysis that recognizes that *Lady Audley's Secret* had at least two different reading publics, and that recognizes that it is unlikely – as has been claimed – that the novel was roundly condemned by reviewers. When we take into account the probability that Braddon's middle-class and working-class readers responded to the novel in different ways, it must necessarily complicate our understanding of what the Victorian public may have thought about the 'sanity', 'insanity', goodness, or badness of Braddon's heroine.

Moreover, one can see from the reviews I have discussed above, that the middle and upper-class critics of *Lady Audley's Secret* actually discussed a range of issues related to the novel. The reviewers do not react only to Lady Audley's behaviour in terms of its being feminine or unfeminine or her rejection of her assigned gender role. The critics also responded with annoyance, incredulity, fear, or aesthetic disdain to the realization that when a character is described as 'mad', the author may gain a licence to do away with 'vraisemblance' and character consistency. This aesthetic concern is also attended by anxieties related to the idea that *all* people could potentially slip into madness, or to the consequences of acquitting criminals on the basis of insanity.

Although some sections of the Victorian public might not have seen *Lady Audley's Secret* as especially 'subversive' at all, but may rather have sided with Lady Audley, the novel *does* subvert various ideas and values that were generally accepted or held in regard during the mid-Victorian period. The novel's subversiveness does not rely solely on its positions for or against traditional gender roles. Rather, some of the novel's more subversive and disquieting aspects arise from the suggestions that the novel makes about the nature of insanity and the way that insanity was diagnosed.

***Lady Audley's Secret*, insanity pleas, and the psychiatric industry.**

While many modern critics of *Lady Audley's Secret* now dismiss the idea that Lucy Audley is 'mad' in any clinical sense, they overlook the fact that Lady Audley's insistence on calling herself a madwoman resembles the fake insanity plea that makes an appearance in Braddon's earliest novel *The Trail of the Serpent*. Braddon had clearly been aware of the 'insanity plea' for some time, and the plots of both novels display an interest in the moral workings of this concept and in its legal repercussions. It is important to note that the category of 'insanity' was, in the Victorian period, specifically used as a *legal* category rather than a psychiatric one, while psychiatrists often simply referred to 'madness'. Lady Audley is regarded by people around her as 'mad' but

because she escapes being tried for her crimes in any legal forum, she is never legally found to be ‘insane’. Rather, she only carries the stigma of ‘madness’ with regard to its social and psychiatric concept. In *The Trail of the Serpent*, however, Richard invokes the idea that he is mentally ill so as to create a legal defence in a murder trial; he manages to establish himself as legally ‘insane’. It may shed some light on Braddon’s intentions with *Lady Audley’s Secret* that Richard’s insanity plea is bogus: the plea is a pretence instigated by Joseph Peters and Richard in order to gain time for Peters to hunt for the real murderer – and – perhaps important in the context of the later novel – allow Richard to escape the usual punishment for the crime he is accused of. Pretending to be insane saves Richard from hanging. Unfortunately, he has to take the pretence very far, and to live in an insane asylum for several years.

While the plots of *The Trail of the Serpent* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* are otherwise quite different, both Richard and Lady Audley take on the label of being ‘mad’, and by doing so they escape being incarcerated in prison or executed for their crimes or alleged crimes. While Lady Audley is diagnosed by the psychiatric profession, and Richard is found insane in a legal forum, both novels show the alleged lunatic fading away while in the asylum.²⁷⁴ Richard’s mental anguish, boredom and loneliness are described in detail in *The Trail of the Serpent*; he becomes so lonely that he almost wishes to die. Richard is rescued from the asylum only just in time; it is suggested that if he had had to wait longer he might have committed suicide or become ill enough to die. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is less explicit about Lucy Audley’s suffering, but she goes through a similar process, as the description of her death suggests that she has succumbed to inertia and depression. Richard is strengthened during his time in the asylum by the knowledge that Peters is investigating his case and that his friends might help him escape. Lady Audley has no such cheerful hopes to sustain her, and knowing that she has been “buried alive”, her spirit fizzles out.²⁷⁵

Despite the fact that Victorian reviews of the novel seem oblivious to the idea, it is extremely likely that with *Lady Audley’s Secret* Braddon aimed to criticise some practices of the psychiatric industry or to implicate the psychiatric industry in practices that were used to control women. This seems obvious from the fact that the psychiatrist

²⁷⁴ To clarify: ‘mad’ was a less formal, more vague term used to describe someone who seemed to have a mental illness or who acted in socially proscribed ways. ‘Insane’ had similar connotations and might be used to describe the same person, but was more specifically a *legal* term. See footnote 285.

²⁷⁵ Lady Audley is said to have perished due to a “maladie de langueur”. In his edition of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Toru Sasaki glosses “maladie de langueur” as “an old term for anaemia; but the name could also be suggestive of mental distress and pining” (Sasaki, “Notes”, *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Note located on p. 446).

who examines Lucy Audley can see for himself that she is not insane, yet agrees to sign documents recommending her confinement. In *The Trail of the Serpent* Braddon recognized the possibility that psychiatrists might be fooled by fake madmen – or at least, chose to emphasise or exaggerate the gullibility of psychiatrists and legal representatives. In *Lady Audley's Secret* the psychiatrist is no longer a gullible fool, but is willing to commit Lady Audley to psychiatric care in order to protect masculine interests from the 'danger' presented by an assertive or free-thinking woman. The psychiatrist even seems slightly sympathetic to Lady Audley, yet is implicated in dishonesty.

One clue to understanding the novel's concern with insanity and with the ethics of committing patients to insane asylums lies in the novel's historical context. Like *The Woman in White*, the novel was written soon after the 'Lunacy Panic' of 1858-9. During this time period it became apparent, via a series of scandals, that a significant number of people had been confined in private asylums when they might in fact be sane. In such cases it was alleged that the asylum patients had been placed in asylums by conniving family members and that psychiatric practitioners had knowingly falsely certified them as insane.²⁷⁶

Therefore the concept of Lady Audley's 'insanity' and the questioning of its actuality cannot be dismissed as merely a sensationalizing theme in the novel's plot or as a thin excuse for Lady Audley's behaviour. Nor does this plot concern relate *only* to the social management of women, since people of both genders had fallen prey to fraudulent confinement. Sending troublesome family members to lunatic asylums seems to have been a fairly frequent practice, and various abuses of this process had been in the public eye just before the publication of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. The concern was with private asylums in particular; it seemed to some members of the public and to friends of alleged lunatics that the processes related to confinement were too lenient or that the standards met by private asylums were not sufficiently investigated.

This concern was still present in 1863, when Charles Reade fervently attacked such perceived injustices in *Hard Cash*. It appears that such anxieties lasted throughout the 1860s, as the issue was still of concern to the editors of the *Cornhill* magazine in 1869, when the magazine published an article about the misuse of *maisons de santé* and the poor conditions encountered in such institutions. Maisons de santé were private madhouses in France and Belgium, but the worry that this article expresses about the

²⁷⁶ A large number of Victorianist critics write about this "Lunacy Panic" and the resultant scandals. See, for example, Peter McCandless, Peter Logan, and Susan Walsh.

standards by which such asylums were run was also felt by members of the British public with regard to private institutions in Britain. The previously mentioned article in the *Cornhill*, even though written in 1869, a few years after Braddon's novel, is of some use when reading *Lady Audley's Secret*, as the private asylum concerned is situated in France, and its situation and methods of business are very similar to those of the isolated Belgian asylum where Lady Audley is buried alive.

“Maisons de santé” in the *Cornhill*.

In 1869 an article titled “Maisons de santé” appeared in the January to June issue of *Cornhill* magazine (Volume 19).²⁷⁷ The article, submitted by an anonymous writer, describes the visit that the writer and a friend made to a private asylum in France earlier that year. The writer and his friend are strolling around the outskirts of Paris when they happen to walk along a street that contains a private lunatic asylum. Having noticed the asylum, the writer and his friend strike up a conversation about such institutions, and the narrator of the piece is given a great deal of information about the maisons de santé by his friend. The narrator reports this information to the reader, and, as we find out, the narrator's further investigations suggest the truth of the scandalous information his friend provides.

The article starts by describing the “narrow, decrepit street” that the maison de santé is located in (“Maisons de santé”, 699). Although the street is “dismal” and in a dirty area, the house in question is “painted from roof to floor in glaring white”. While this distinguishes it from other buildings in the street, it is also set apart from them because there are bars and shutters on the windows (699). The narrator instantly feels that something is disturbing about this situation, first locating this disturbance in terms of its effect on his own senses, and then via a personification of the building which suggests the building suffers from its own sensory lack [or lack of senses?]: “There was something chill and gloomy in this arrangement [...] If I must say so, the house seemed blind” (699). The narrator also suggests that the interior of the house may be full of “death”, since the inhabitants cannot see out and cannot see or feel the sun.

The narrator states that the French maisons de santé “had been mentioned to me as private mad-houses; but the enormous number of them I had seen in Paris, had led me to fancy, or at least to hope, that this definition might be incorrect” (699). While seeming to

²⁷⁷ This article appeared about seven and a half years after the first serial installment of *Lady Audley's Secret* and just over six years after its first publication in three-volume form.

suggest the pathos of there being so many private madhouses in France, the apparent ubiquity of such madhouses is also the first indication in this article that there may be something dubious about these institutions. However, the narrator also soon realises that his understanding of the function of the *maisons de santé* is misguided, and that they are *not* merely used to house the insane, but rather have a wider clientele:

A maison de santé, I was then told, is an asylum for people of any condition, but principally for the rich, who, from bodily or mental infirmities, or from certain other causes, are deemed by society, or by the rulers thereof, better under lock and key than at large (699).

The narrator's friend continues to tell him about the inhabitants of the *maisons de santé*. Some people are sent there only because they are old or require more care than their family can provide. Young men might be sent there by their families because they are spendthrift and they can only be stopped from spending by being locked up. Young women might be sent there because they have attracted too much sexual attention. These committals may well be less voluntary or necessary than the committals for old age and illness. The narrator's friend also insists that the *maisons de santé* are sometimes used to replace the political function of the *lettres de cachet*, to help the state punish its enemies: some asylums hold people who have run afoul of their friends or families or who have attracted attention for their political beliefs (703). The friend explains such practices by suggesting that France is despotic and wants above all things to maintain discipline (702).²⁷⁸ It appears, therefore, that the French *maisons de santé* function largely as a place to hide people away when they are embarrassing, or as a place to discipline the disreputable.

The friend also explains the varying quality between - and indeed *within* - various *maisons de santé*. It would seem that some *maisons de santé* are quite pleasant, as sometimes debtors send themselves to an asylum on purpose so they can escape being apprehended by their creditors. This only requires finding two doctors who will testify to their ill health.²⁷⁹ Of course, this idea also introduces the idea of fraud in connection with

²⁷⁸ The friend explains further: the consequence of expressing a critical opinion of someone in power might be that one is taken to the police and placed in an asylum by two doctors. Such instances are common. According to the narrator's friend, once confined, the prisoner has very little chance of escape. The press is not "free" and thus it cannot use its influence to help. The prisoner's only hope is to escape or ask an influential friend to help them. The influential friend must promise authorities that if the confined person is freed, they will answer for that person's behaviour; the only alternative for the person freed from the asylum is that they must leave the country (702).

²⁷⁹ The narrator's friend describes how lax the conditions of the *maisons de santé* are for such debtors. Some *maisons* allow their "captives" to walk around town on their own, under the condition that they always come back. However, if such captives actually escape, the owner of the *maison de santé* might lose

the maisons de santé. While some maisons de santé are no better than “private mad-houses”, others are sumptuous and charge between 400 to 600 francs per month (700). The narrator and his friend therefore conclude that while some maisons de santé are real “lunatic” asylums, others are more like hotels (702).

The narrator’s friend informs him that one cannot usually see the inmates of a madhouse except in a special parlour; one might also need to be a friend of someone with authority at the asylum. Nevertheless, the two friends decide to visit one such establishment. Entering the asylum, they find a cheerful garden. The owner appears to speak to them, and the two visitors pretend that they have a friend who has become insane, as a pretext for asking about the asylum and looking at its grounds. The asylum’s owner assures the friends that his is “not a common mad-house”, but “a house of convalescence and of retreat” (an upmarket madhouse). He informs them that they must not be surprised if they see men there who do not seem like lunatics: such people are there only because they need rest after “nervous excitement” (704). While such asylums certainly were sometimes used for people to engage in rest cures, or to recover after less serious breakdowns, one could also regard the owner’s statements with suspicion. The owner’s assessment of the asylum sounds even more dubious as he explains that some of the patients might tell visitors that they are fine and that they have been kept there falsely due to base motives. The asylum owner assures his visitors that this is merely a “hallucination” on the part of the patients, because the only people who can be kept there against their will are those who are “notoriously insane” (704).

The owner then shows his visitors the section of the asylum housing those people who are “nearly cured” – probably with a view to showing them the most tastefully decorated part of the asylum. In this section the patients have no restraints. The owner’s choice to take them first to this section seems a little suspicious, with the idea that the patients are “nearly cured” perhaps functioning as an excuse for why the patients might appear perfectly well to the lay person. In fact, the two visitors soon encounter a man who, to their eyes, appears to be completely sane; the asylum owner’s assessment of him, however, is that he is “mad”, but has “lucid intervals” (705). It is almost impossible for a reader of the article to tell whether the asylum keeper is honest or not, but a further sense of his possible duplicity is excited by the fact that as he walks in the garden, several inmates approach him and ask him when they will be freed. They accuse him of

their license and be fined; furthermore, if creditors see their debtor loose on the street, they may send the debtor back to jail and sue the owner of the maison de santé (700).

promising to release them or to send letters for them, but never doing so. The narrator watches two men playing draughts, and notes “had I met them elsewhere than a maison de santé I should never have suspected them of unsoundness of mind”. He then expresses the realization that “I have nothing but the assurance of the director to guarantee me that they were indeed what they were supposed to be” (706). Meanwhile, the man in charge of this particular division is not paying any attention to the inmates, but instead is smoking and reading. The visitors feel that if the patients are in fact dangerous at all, with such a lack of supervision it would be easy for a patient to kill another (706). The visitors also wonder (to themselves) how such an asylum could be restful when those who are merely “resting” are confined along with genuine “idiots”. The narrator concludes that it would be “torture” to live in such a place and that if one were not mad already, the asylum would make one mad (707).

The visitors express much sympathy for the inmates of the asylum and observe to the asylum’s owner that if the men’s insanity is only intermittent, it seems harsh never to award them any liberty. However, the asylum’s owner replies that letting the patients walk outside the asylum is not part of his methods of “treatment”. Somehow, the implication of the narration is that the asylum owner simply does not want to risk his inmates escaping.

The asylum’s owner/doctor appears to be discomfited again when he takes his visitors to see the first-class division. Having, one assumes, intended to impress the visitors with its comparative luxury, he is caught out when one simple question from the visitors reveals that the division does not give its inmates more freedom to move around because they are nearly well, but merely because they *pay more money* (708). While this distinction may be apparent from the concept of a ‘first class’ division, it is nevertheless embarrassing to the doctor to admit that the divisions may have nothing to do with mental health and everything to do with patients’ relative wealth (708).²⁸⁰

To their horror, the visitors discover that the fourth division of the asylum is still using strait-waistcoats, cold baths and cold showers to restrain maniacs (710). Moreover, the asylum’s doctor states that he does not generally attempt to cure his patients, as he believes it is usually impossible to get at the organic cause of a mental illness (710). Perhaps the most upsetting discovery that the visitors make at the asylum is when they speak with a young Scotsman who says he is not mad at all, but simply became ill in Paris with a brain-fever. The people running his Hotel chose to have him locked up

²⁸⁰ The expensive rooms in the first-class division are revealed to cost 240l per year (709).

instead of looking after him. The Scotsman states that he has been stuck in the asylum for nine months, unable to correspond with his family because the doctor suppresses his letters (709-10). The young Scotsman is also upset with the asylum inspector, who assumes that every complaint is a symptom of insanity. Moreover, if the inspector ever voices a suspicion that an inmate is not insane, the asylum doctor merely assures him that that patient is having a lucid period. The narrators, who believe the young man, note happily in their report that he was eventually freed (709).

While the two men visiting the asylum are never one hundred per cent certain that the asylum is routinely keeping people there when they have always been sane, or detaining them after they have been cured, the writer of the article obviously thinks something dishonest is occurring. He therefore paints an extremely depressing picture of the French *maisons de santé*, concluding that these asylums are

open to many and most lamentable abuses. The supervision exercised over them by government is altogether insufficient; many men are retained in them a most unwarrantable time after their recovery, and it is much to be feared that many, confined in them unjustly, are unable to bear the positively depressing melancholy life to which they are forced, and positively go mad (710).

The narrator feels that France must move to make the use of private mad-houses more exclusive: they should be used as retreats only “for those who are really and unquestionably insane” (710).

This narrative in the *Cornhill* reminds us that such strange misuses of madhouses actually did occur in Britain and the Continent during the mid-nineteenth century, and when Charles Reade made use of such stories in the plotline of his novel *Hard Cash* (1863), he made a point of documenting the factual bases of his novel. The concerns expressed by the anonymous writer for the *Cornhill* – a mainstream magazine – suggest that even during the 1860s, not merely during the earlier Lunacy Panic of 1858-1859, the British public may have been sceptical about the standards of the European *maisons de santé*, or even sceptical about psychiatrists in general. Toru Sasaki, writing about *Lady Audley's Secret*, suggests that Braddon's novel is not completely accurate in its depiction of how easily Robert Audley has Lady Audley confined: he suggests that Robert would need to have obtained the cooperation of a greater number of doctors, and that it would not have been possible to have Lady Audley confined under an alias (see *Lady Audley's Secret*, edited by Toru Sasaki, 387). However, the ease with which Robert has Lady Audley committed to the Belgian asylum does seem to be reflected in the findings of the

men who explored the Parisian asylum and reported to the *Cornhill*. Therefore it is possible that for the Victorian public, Lady Audley might not have appeared to be a straightforward representation of a ‘madwoman’ but may have been interpretable as someone who is unfairly restrained or punished for more political reasons. Even so, modern readers must nevertheless recognize that the novel does represent Lady Audley as – at least ostensibly – seriously obsessed with the fear of hereditary insanity.

Helen Small, in her wide-ranging *Love’s Madness*, a study of fictional depictions of female insanity, provides information that may aid our understanding of the social and literary context of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In the first half of the nineteenth century “Victorian fiction writers were only too happy to treat the subject of insanity as an opportunity for horror-mongering”,²⁸¹ even though case studies of medical psychology were moving toward an “increasingly brutal realism” (Small, 182). However, writers later began to focus on the issue of how much sympathy should be shown toward the insane, and from the 1850s onward, some novelists began to articulate “outright opposition to the alienist’s authority” (Small, 182-183; see also 184). These novelists began to “explore the limits of medical understanding and the destructiveness of medical knowledge” (Small, 183).²⁸² Since the 1850s and 1860s had seen a spate of well-publicised cases in which people were wrongly diagnosed as insane and then denied recourse, sensation novels did not create this concern about the trustworthiness of doctors, but rather gave “imaginative voice” to an already existing public fear. Small surmises that the appearance of such concerns in literature was prompted by a belief in “the moral obligations of art and literature” (Small, 185), a suggestion that undermines the claim by Victorian reviewers of sensation fiction that the sensation novel’s focus on such issues was driven by morbidity.

As modern-day readers we may struggle to accept the idea that Lady Audley is ‘insane’, or even the less formal term, ‘mad’. We may feel sceptical of other characters’ claims about her. However, there is one other way that one may potentially understand Lady Audley’s ‘madness’: by considering the popular Victorian concept of ‘moral insanity’.

²⁸¹ Small indicates one example: Thomas Peckett Prest’s *The Maniac Father; or, The Victim of Seduction. A Romance* (1842) (see Small, 182, note 10).

²⁸² Small cites Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) as a novel in which the author combats contemporary psychology’s reductive understanding of hysteria (Small, 183).

Competing paradigms of madness.

Apart from the more clinical, psychiatrically-based manifestations of insanity, some Victorians also believed in ‘moral insanity’. Peter Logan explains that

In 1835 ‘James Cowles Prichard published his *Treatise on Insanity* (1835), which initiated a new era in Victorian mental medicine with the invention of “Moral Insanity”, a kind of partial insanity that accounted for socially unacceptable or unconventional behaviors (Logan, “Imitations of Insanity and Victorian Medical Aesthetics”).²⁸³

While the individual in question might appear perfectly sane with regard to some areas of their life, and might reason upon some topics with rationality,

In cases of this description the moral and active principles . . . are strangely perverted and depraved; the power of self-government is lost or greatly impaired; and the individual is found to be incapable, not of talking or reasoning upon any subject proposed to him . . . but of conducting himself with decency and propriety in the business of life (Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity*; qtd. in Taylor and Shuttleworth, 252, and also in Logan, “Imitations of Insanity”).

As with ‘monomania’, ‘moral insanity’ was a form of partial insanity; more specifically, it was “melancholia or mania on a discrete topic. Otherwise, the mind is untouched and so the condition easily passes unnoticed” (Logan, “Imitations of Insanity”). One problem related to moral insanity was that its “bodily signs were unobservable to most”; therefore a “physician might ‘discover the first scintillations of brain disease, even when the patient and those about him repudiate all idea of cerebral ill health, and refuse to acknowledge, the necessity for medical advice, or treatment’” (Winslow, *On Obscure Diseases of the Brain* (1860); qtd. in Logan, “Imitations of Insanity”; see Logan’s note 20). As Peter Logan suggests, the nature of this diagnosis meant a person could quite easily be “certified and confined against his or her will”. Another consequence of the acceptance of the concept of moral insanity was that this necessarily led to the creation of “ever-broader definitions of insanity” (Logan, “Imitations of Insanity”).

It seems to me that if one thinks about Lucy Audley while bearing in mind the Victorians’ increasing acceptance of ‘moral insanity’, twenty-first century readers of *Lady Audley’s Secret* might be able to read Lady Audley as ‘mad’ after all, or understand how Victorian readers could regard her as such. However, in her book *Unstable Bodies*,

²⁸³ This article was published online and does not feature page numbers. It appears in *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 49, at <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/017855ar>>.

Jill Matus considers this possible reading of Lady Audley and concludes that a diagnosis of moral insanity is not an appropriate label to give to Lady Audley. Matus concedes that to some degree,

The cool Lady Audley illustrates very well ... what moral insanity was thought to be: a morbid perversion of the moral disposition and natural impulses that did not seem to come from any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, and that did not result in delusions or hallucinations (Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, 196).

In some ways, Lady Audley's behaviour matches the tendencies of those who were thought to be morally insane; moreover, it seems that it is her non-conformity that is judged and attacked by others, rather than her brain functioning or her reasoning skills. She does not act in a way that is considered socially acceptable:

The doctrine of 'moral insanity' articulated the Victorian tendency to regard crime or sin as a species of insanity; it referred to madness as the experience of inappropriate emotions rather than the result of defective reasoning or cognitive impairment ... The definition drew attention to anti-social or deviant behaviour, as emotional and ethical confusion resulting from the immoderate, excessive, and undisciplined passions (Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, 196).

Such a diagnosis was even more problematic than usual diagnoses of mental pathology, since the idea of moral insanity rested on highly subjective grounds. One could be regarded as a lunatic simply for being non-conformist in any way. Eventually, Jill Matus concludes that this is not the whole issue at stake in *Lady Audley's Secret* because "To have argued, however, that the heartless Lady Audley was merely morally insane would not have been sensational enough; nor would it have allowed Braddon sufficient scope to explore the way discourses of madness help to construct gender" (Matus, *ibid.*, 197-98). Matus's discussion of this issue is quite thorough, and while I agree that reading Lady Audley as 'morally insane' does not take full account of Braddon's commentary about gender restrictions, it certainly explains some aspects of it. Lady Audley's behaviour is obviously deemed aberrant not just because it is unusual, but because it is unusual *for a woman*. I believe therefore that that moral insanity may be one paradigm through which Victorian readers understood Lady Audley.

Some comments by the modern critic Natalie Schroeder tie in with this issue of moral insanity (or its modern successor, 'sociopathy') to some degree. Schroeder suggests that Lady Audley is particularly violent because she has developed a strong sense of herself

and her own self-worth. Because of this sense of her own worth she acts with particular intensity to protect herself. However, the novel refers to Lady Audley's sense of self-worth as her "vanity", so it is never entirely obvious how we should respond to this vanity. Lady Audley's vanity becomes one way for her "to assert power in her limited social sphere", and is in fact the source of her (*unfeminine*) strength (Schroeder, "Feminine Sensationalism", 90). To emphasise this self-love, Schroeder quotes from the section of Braddon's novel in which Lady Audley

recalled that early time in which she had first looked in the glass and discovered that she was beautiful; that fatal early time in which she had first begun to look upon her loveliness as a right divine (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 296; qtd. in Schroeder, 90).

The novel *does* indeed insist that Lady Audley is "selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical", and locates *some* of the blame for this behaviour in her over-valuation of her own beauty (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 297) or in her "selfish, sensuous nature" (372). The description of Lady Audley as lacking any care for others makes her sound sociopathic, and to some degree the development of such attitudes seems to be her own choice. However, it is also strongly implied that the development of such thoughts and behaviours was prompted by her early life of deprivation. Lucy Audley had to love herself, because no one else did. She learned to value and use her beauty because it was the only means by which she could acquire and wield any power. Our judgments about these attitudes may also be mitigated by the fact that during the time that she is not in material need – when she is a governess, and afterwards when she lives comfortably with Sir Michael – she is described as treating others with compassion (see *Lady Audley's Secret*, 5-6 and 354).

Another modern critic, Christopher Herbert, in an article titled "The Doctrine of Survivals, the Great Mutiny, and *Lady Audley's Secret*", has pointed out an even more problematic way to read Lady Audley's 'madness'. Herbert points out that despite the novel's sympathy toward Lady Audley, it nevertheless depicts a process by which Victorian society appears to position femininity and madness as *the same thing*. Perhaps it is not just Lady Audley who is mad, but the condition of being female that is inherently pathological, or treated by society as pathological. If so, *Lady Audley's Secret* posits 'femininity as madness' not to suggest that this is a psychological truth, but as a

reflection of society's beliefs and constructions. Herbert therefore does read Lady Audley as 'insane', but suggests that hers is a form of "cultural" madness (Herbert, 434).

Herbert's reading becomes less convincing, however, when he places *Lady Audley's Secret* within the Gothic novel tradition and identifies it as offering "one of the most richly elaborated redactions of the motif of the sinister doppelgänger ... the sense of being haunted by an uncanny-seeming vicarious or potential identity" (Herbert, 434). Herbert remarks on Lady Audley's sense of having a split nature and suggests that the novel also shows the influence of evolutionary theory, in reverse: Lady Audley encounters "the ineffaceable presence" of unconscious instincts deep in her nature, "the sombre and ferocious instincts which religion and civilization can never wholly eradicate" (see Herbert, 434).²⁸⁴ He therefore believes that Lady Audley should not be read as a wicked masquerader, and that her virtue "is perfectly real", but "she is haunted by a diabolical second self" (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 287; qtd. in Herbert, 436).

Herbert therefore argues that we can take Lady Audley's claims about her madness at face value and accepts her claim that she is sometimes "impelled by some horrible demoniac force" (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 324) toward a "passionate, hungry craving for violence and horror" (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 287; qtd. in Herbert, 435-436). However, even though such a reading recognises that Braddon's novel is affected by evolutionary theory and the fear of regression to primitive states, reading the novel in this way would lead us to interpret it as a psychological horror in which Lady Audley is tormented by a 'double'. Such a reading would deprive Lady Audley of a great deal of culpability, but would also detract from the novel's commentary about poverty and about how the restricted possibilities for middle-class women push Lady Audley toward criminality and self-protection. Instead this reading emphasises Lady Audley's entrapment in the biological, suggesting that her violence, secrecy, and defensive behaviours are prompted by a madness which she cannot control. Moreover, Herbert's reading is not entirely convincing, because Braddon's novel does not make it clear that we should believe Lady Audley's assertions that she is 'haunted' by such a second self, and there is no example of a manifestation of a 'double'.

Herbert also posits that

The most provocative implication of *Lady Audley's Secret* ... may be that ultimately the two antithetical formations, idealized feminine moral beauty

²⁸⁴ Herbert refers to the ideas of G.M. Trevelyan and Sigmund Freud. G.M. Trevelyan was a "Victorian historian of the [Indian] Mutiny" (Herbert, 434). See George Otto Trevelyan, *Cawnpore* (1865).

on the one hand and sadistic destructiveness on the other, may prove to be at some level of the psyche or of modern culture *identical* or, let us say, alternating cognate phases of each other (Herbert, 435).

Herbert's reading puts forward the provocative idea that for the Victorians, femininity might be imagined as *being* a form of 'madness'. But it also creates confusion over whether Lady Audley is trapped into repeating violent and atavistic tendencies because *all* humans might carry vestiges of primitive behaviour, or whether she is trapped because, as a *woman*, she is more susceptible to primitivism – or, does he assert that Lady Audley's femininity *is* her madness?

Despite all of these different theories, and despite the final fate of Lady Audley, to most modern readers of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley does not appear to be a madwoman. One question we may wish to raise, therefore, is whether it is possible to interpret - *the novel's* attitude toward Lady Audley, her actions, and her sanity? David Skilton suggests that Braddon *does* provide hints to her personal feelings on the matter of Lady Audley's 'madness' and death, via the ending of the novel. Skilton writes: "In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon would have us accept that all is for the best in the ending she provides, but in truth we are made to know that it is not so". He states that "the title of Chapter 6 of Volume 3, 'Buried Alive'

not only speaks for itself, but is an unforgettable phrase which recurs in Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, still fresh in the public's mind from 1859, where it evokes the cruel injustice of Dr Manette's eighteen-year imprisonment in the Bastille (Skilton, "Introduction", xvi).

As I pointed out earlier, it could also be possible that readers familiar with Braddon's earlier work would think back to *The Trail of the Serpent* and recall that Richard Marwood is incorrectly locked up and regarded as insane. Readers of *Lady Audley's Secret*, therefore, might have regarded Lady Audley's fate in the context of the earlier *A Tale of Two Cities*, or in the light of the injustice suffered by Richard in the earlier Braddon novel.

However, if the reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* decides not to regard Lady Audley as insane, they are nevertheless left wondering 'why does Lady Audley end up in the asylum?' The best, although rather simplified, answer to this question is that this occurs largely because she harms Robert Audley's friend and then engages in a battle of wits and willpower with Robert. Her decision to fight him seems, in retrospect, to be a mistake. Once suspected and then caught out by Robert, Lady Audley should perhaps have cut her losses and run – or could conceivably have repented her actions and

returned to her first husband. Instead, Lady Audley stands her ground, attempts to deny everything, and finally threatens Robert.

I am not alone in my conclusion that such battles for position and power are the real issues at stake in this novel, rather than the question of Lady Audley's sanity. Several critics have felt that the reason behind the heroine's confinement is "that patriarchy cannot abide or accommodate a woman who threatens male control or male relationships" (Schipper, 47).²⁸⁵ Natalie Schroeder, for example, interprets the novel as an overt representation of a battle of the sexes: "Lady Audley clearly perceives that she is a victim of a sexual battle: 'You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley,' she cried; 'You have used your power basely and cruelly, and have brought me to a living grave'" (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 256; qtd. in Schroeder, 99). While it may be dangerous to overemphasise the novel's general 'subversiveness', it is not difficult to place Lady Audley within a literary tradition of women being branded as 'mad' due to exhibitions of anti-social, or simply non-traditional behaviour; nor is it especially hard to interpret Lady Audley's committal to an asylum as a representation of the patriarchal world reasserting its familial and social control.

Another way of understanding the novel's explorations of questions of insanity is to consider the character, motives, and actions of Robert Audley, who chases after Lady Audley, detects her secrets, and then punishes her. While Robert eventually shows no mercy to Lady Audley, throughout much of the novel he is "alternatively disturbed and entranced by her". "His conviction to unveil Lady Audley becomes more than a plan to avenge the suspected death of his friend; it becomes a culturally-conditioned obligation to assert masculine power and banish the disruptive female" (Schipper, 45).

At first, Robert sees Lady Audley as a demure, babyish woman, but once he views the Pre-Raphaelite-like portrait of her, Robert begins to suspect that there is another "side of her nature, a powerful sexualized one, and from then on he is threatened by her" (Carnell, *The Literary Lives*, 252). That the battle between Robert Audley and Lady Audley is a gendered one is also displayed in the fact that when Robert finally accuses Lady Audley and presents her with circumstantial evidence against her, her instinctual response is to pretend that "she cannot understand." During this scene, "Both take refuge in traditional

²⁸⁵ Jill Matus points out that Lady Audley is likely seen as deviant because of her failure to live up to ideal motherhood, while Jan Schipper suggests that Lady Audley is punished because her actions "imitate male actions"; insanity emerges "as the excuse when she reacts in a way that mimics typical male behaviour" (Schipper, 53). Lyn Pykett regards Lady Audley as a representative of "the classic nineteenth-century madwoman", who is "the deviant, energetic woman who defies familial and social control" (Pykett, *The Sensation Novel*, 20; qtd. in Schipper, 53).

sex roles, Robert as masculine and assertive, Lady Audley feigns weakness and ultra femininity” (Carnell, 253). It is only after this fails that Lady Audley threatens to tell others that Robert is insane. “Eventually, it is Robert who does what she had threatened him with, arranging for Lady Audley, who may be as sane as himself, to be committed to an asylum” (Carnell, 255).

Arguably, Lucy Audley’s attempts to cast doubt on Robert’s sanity are not especially unfair; they have very little less foundation than his attempts to do the same to her. As Toru Sasaki notes in his edition of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon represents Robert Audley as an extremely indolent underachiever at the start of the novel, and as a phlegmatic person who possesses “an unemotional and stolidly calm disposition” (Sasaki, note to p. 33 of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 449). While Robert could merely be interpreted as lazy and easy-going, a more sinister interpretation of his stolidity and lack of emotion could be to interpret him as misanthropic or even tending toward sociopathy (especially sinister when mixed with misogyny). Robert does not display any great feeling for anyone other than himself, except George Talboys. It seems hypocritical for Robert to present Lady Audley as a madwoman when he is as spoilt and self-loving as Lady Audley is, just as lacking in remorse, and finally, as driven and determined as she is.

The novel also raises the discourse of monomania in relation to Robert. In fact, Robert suggests this about *himself*, realizing that he might be displaying signs of monomania in his obsession with detecting Lady Audley’s villainy, seeing sinister connections when there are none there (*Lady Audley’s Secret*, 254).²⁸⁶ Whether or not he is right to suspect her, he still seems monomaniacal in his need to take revenge for his friend. His realization that he may be delusional actually backs up Lady Audley’s accusations that he displays monomania with regard to his ideas about her (266). Robert may or may not be correct to consider himself a monomaniac, but his actions appear to be a means of exerting male power and of expelling his previous impotence (an ‘impotence’ not only related to his professional indolence, but also to his implied sexual or romantic frustrations: he cannot possess George Talboys, he cannot understand or commit to his cousin Alicia, and he cannot possess Lady Audley, his aunt). Sally Shuttleworth states that during the Victorian period, “Male insanity, contemporary theorists argued, could be caused both by sexual continence and by failure to exert oneself in professional life” (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 204). While readers probably do not really

²⁸⁶ Robert makes his first reference to his own possible monomania in Chapter XIX (page 146). Two further narratorial comments on pages 172 and 211 stress the degree to which Robert becomes obsessed by the disappearance of George Talboys and driven to find evidence against Lady Audley.

regard Robert as 'mad', the fact that Lady Audley seeks to present him as such draws attention to the fact that the discourse of madness is simply that, a *discourse*, in which particular individuals are presented as mad and 'proven' to be so via an accumulation of details, anecdotes, and subjective observations.

It would not be out of the question, therefore, for readers to interpret Robert Audley as being morally or psychologically dubious himself; an increasing number of modern critics have done so. For example, David Skilton suggests that Robert's reading of French fiction indicates his irresponsibility and that French novels would have "represented for the contemporary readership a surreptitious fingering of forbidden zones of sexuality" (Skilton, "Introduction", *Lady Audley's Secret*, xiv). Robert may seem even more dubious if one suspects him of feeling a sexual interest in his 'aunt' or deriving a kind of erotic excitement from chasing after her or exerting power over her (see Skilton, "Introduction", xx).

Lady Audley is resistant to male power partly because she does not seem to be very sexually attracted to men: "The common temptations that assail and shipwreck some women had no terror for me" (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 354). Lady Audley makes this statement in order to suggest that her lack of passion would make her a good wife because she is not prone to physical temptation. As long as her husband provides for her materially, she will remain faithful. She suggests that romantic love and sexual passion are a "mad folly" (354). But, ironically, it is Lady Audley's *lack* of such passion that indicates an aberrant nature. Her passion is directed toward herself. This resistance to men may be another anomaly for which she is punished. Nevertheless, she is regarded by males as emitting a sexual energy and being attractive; in this way, too, she becomes dangerous to males. Thomas Boyle has suggested that this may also be one of the problems that constitutes Lady Audley's 'madness'. By engaging in bigamy, Lady Audley challenges the Victorian understanding of how society works, and "opens a new, untried vista of what may be" ("Our Female Sensation Novelists", *The Christian Remembrancer*, 211; qtd. in Boyle, "'Fishy Extremities'", 93).

As Jeanne Fahnestock suggests, the interest in bigamy exhibited in *Lady Audley's Secret* shows "a unique response to a particular moment in social history" (Fahnestock, "Bigamy", 71). Fahnestock reads the frequent appearance of bigamy in sensation fiction as reflecting a "new uncertainty over the ideal definition of marriage" (Fahnestock, "Bigamy", 66), and whether marriage should be based on love, or whether it is primarily a legal or social bond. Thomas Boyle suggests that during the Victorian period there was

a widely held belief that bigamy could not exist “except in the most extremely deranged situations” (Boyle, 94). Lady Audley’s breaking of the marriage bond may therefore also be read as part of the reason for her committal to the asylum.

Boyle’s commentary also suggests that Lady Audley’s bigamy hints at “wish-fulfillment” fantasies (see Boyle, 93), and at an atavistic conflation of the human with the bestial – a fear seen in Robert Audley’s dream, in which Lady Audley’s “beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her neck” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* [Dover edition], 165; qtd. in Boyle, 95). The danger of her sexuality is hinted at by “her metamorphosis into a part animal creature” (Boyle, 95). Boyle also quotes from the *Christian Remembrancer*, which observed that sensation stories “express a certain degradation of the human into the animal or brutal on the call of strong emotion” (“Our Female Sensation Novelists”, 212; qtd. in Boyle, 95).²⁸⁷ Thus, *Lady Audley’s Secret* draws our attention to the possibly tenuous boundary between beast and man (Boyle, 95-96). Therefore, every time Lady Audley becomes passionate or angry, these emotions or actions might hint not only at her underlying or potential ‘madness’, but that she is slipping into ‘animality’.

Lady Audley’s relative lack of domesticity could also have been read as an indication of her ‘madness’ or aberrancy, since during the Victorian period, many people promoted the idea that it was natural for a woman to be kind, nurturing, passive, to put others first, and to hold to domestic values. Braddon’s work was usually judged by contemporaries

in terms of how the female characters measured up to conventional standards of femininity. If a female was aggressive, she was demonic or unrealistic; if her aggressiveness was countered by redeeming feminine weakness, she was forgiven (Schroeder, 100).

When we return to thinking about Robert Audley’s pursuit of Lady Audley and his construction of her as ‘madwoman’, one can see that not only does Robert detect Lady Audley’s deceptions via an accumulation of details and incidents, but that he attempts to demonstrate her madness in the same way: via an accumulation of circumstantial evidence. For this reason, his assertion that Lady Audley is mad never appears completely convincing, for he does not prove his case. The evidence he puts forward proves only that Lady Audley has acted in her own best interests, and that, as Doctor

²⁸⁷ Boyle notes that this observation seems accurate. He mentions that in *The Woman in White* Anne Catherick is “possessed by a ‘wild unnatural force’ which makes her eyes dilate ‘like the eyes of a wild animal’”. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the sexually-driven Bradley Headstone is “‘an ill-tamed wild animal’. ... In Reade’s *Hard Cash*, asylum inmates give off ‘the peculiar wild-beast smell that marks the true maniac’” (Boyle, “‘Fishy Extremities’”, 95).

Mosgrave says, she might be “dangerous” (to men). Moreover, as befits one connotation of the word ‘circumstantial’, Lady Audley’s more antisocial actions have all been taken due to the difficult circumstances in which she found herself. However, Robert’s circumstantial ‘proof’ is taken as sufficient, because it is he who creates the rules by which she is ‘tried’ and who has the power to enforce the outcome: “the court to which Robert Audley brings Lady Audley is a court of his own making” (Houston, “Mary Braddon’s Commentaries”, 21).

Gail Turley Houston observes that Lady Audley is not even someone within Robert’s “official jurisdiction” (Houston, 23), that he subjects her to an unsanctioned “secret tribunal” (Houston, 24), and that his “misogynist private opinions affect his practice of the law” (Houston, 23). I concur with Houston’s reading that “Robert’s view of himself as the law is meant to be troubling”, and that the novel demonstrates that while Robert’s “moral handicaps do not impede his legal potency”, “Lucy, as a woman, is legally handicapped” (ibid., 22). Moreover, it is interesting to note that while Robert Audley finally inherits Audley Court, Lady Audley states that the only thing she has ever inherited was her mother’s insanity (*Lady Audley’s Secret*, 350). By this plot detail Braddon may imply “the collusion between man-made courts of law and male property rights” (Houston, “Mary Braddon’s Commentaries”, 21).

Moreover, as Sally Shuttleworth explains, the “insanity” that is “Passed through the female line ... appears as a symbolic encapsulation of the conditions of femininity – of economic and social powerlessness” (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 205). Therefore, while *Lady Audley’s Secret* is often interpreted in the light of its depiction of gender roles, the imagery of *disability* pervades this novel: as in some of Wilkie Collins’s novels, disability functions as a symbolic register of the precarious position of women and their relative lack of social power. In this case, disability is social, legal, and mental, entwined with the idea of cultural, economic, and biological inheritance.

Meanwhile, both Katherine Montwieler and Jill Matus point out that what “seems primarily to be the matter with Lady Audley is that she threatens to violate class boundaries and exclusions, and to get away with appropriating social power beyond her entitlement” (Montwieler, 335). It seems that apart from a desire to find out what happened to George, the real motivation for Robert’s hunting of Lady Audley is located in his wish to protect the aristocracy and the associated interests of the patriarchy. He defends his actions by asserting that Lady Audley has harmed Sir Michael. Jennifer Carnell notes that “Most importantly, Robert restores order, and the criminal intruder is

removed from the aristocratic home” (Carnell, 255). Once this social order is restored, “the men are free to work out the homosocial relationships which determine society’s structures” (Nemesvari, “Robert Audley’s Secret”, 526).

If we interpret the novel along such lines, we may conclude that the question of Lady Audley’s sanity is not the main point of the novel, but rather, that “Braddon makes a pessimistic statement about marriage and the fate of women who try to exercise their strength for their own ends” (Schroeder, 100) – or even a more general pessimistic statement about the avenues open to women who wished to be in any way self-assertive. Feminist readings of *Lady Audley’s Secret* along these lines are currently prevalent because such readings are easily defensible. For example, Jan Schipper suggests that Braddon’s fiction conveys the idea that Victorian women were placed in such narrow confines by marriage, motherhood and lack of earning power, that their existence was “analogous to slavery” (Schipper, 2). It is not difficult to find such suggestions in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. At the end of the novel Lucy Audley is “buried alive” in the Belgian asylum. But we could question whether this environment is any worse for her than the situation she faced earlier: she was also “buried alive” when she was left alone by her husband, without an income, in a small village, with a young child and an alcoholic father.

Therefore, it is certainly possible to read *Lady Audley’s Secret* as focusing mostly on the professional and economic limitations faced by middle-class women during the mid-Victorian period. However, even though it no longer seems plausible to regard Lady Audley as insane in any clinical sense, I still regard the issue of Lady Audley’s sanity to be of greatest importance to this novel, not merely because her sanity remains ambiguous but because this issue is used to question the ways in which the psychiatric profession determines sanity.

In his essay “Imitations of Insanity” Peter Logan explains that it was widely understood that even leading psychiatrists like John Conolly made their diagnoses of psychiatric disturbances based on methods that were largely subjective: interpretations of behaviours and outward signs such as physiognomy. Conolly admitted that his interpretations were subjective, based on a code of psychiatric “aesthetics” that was highly reliant on “impressionism”. As Logan points out, “Like any form of impressionism, it has its dangers; it runs the risk of confusing interpreter with interpretee, subject with object, even in the most sincere of its practitioners” (Logan, “Imitations of Insanity”). Such transference of motivations, aberrancy, or symptoms between the subject

of inquiry and the one who is inquiring go some way toward explaining how it is that Lady Audley is detected as ‘insane’ and punished, while Robert Audley, who may be a ‘monomaniac’, escapes public detection or any castigation. It may seem to us now that conspicuously subjective “impressionism” should have little place in psychiatry, but Peter Logan suggests that during the Victorian period “our most disparate categories, like medicine and aesthetics, enjoyed a more intimate contact” (Logan, “Imitations of Insanity”). The question at stake at the time was not whether complete diagnostic objectivity and accuracy could be achieved, but whether outsiders felt that the psychiatrist was qualified to make such judgments, and trusted his judgement (see Logan, *ibid.*).

While Robert’s punishment of Lady Audley may be due to his own ‘monomania’, readers may nevertheless feel that some ambiguity hangs over Lady Audley’s mental state, partly because readers do not enter into Lady Audley’s thoughts very often: Lady Audley’s “thoughts have to be hidden from the reader or there would be no secrets to reveal” (Carnell, *The Literary Lives*, 255). *Lady Audley’s Secret* does not function as a psychological novel by providing the reader with deep insights into the heroine’s thoughts or interior monologues. The reader receives a largely ‘exterior’ view of Lady Audley, and is left to judge Lady Audley almost entirely by her actions – which are so far beyond the ‘usual’ actions of young women, that they can be interpreted as ‘mad’.

As Jenny Bourne Taylor recounts, one Victorian critic writing for the *Spectator* noted that despite the prevalence of madness in sensation novels, there seemed to be “no one formula or set of conventions for assessing how this process worked” (“Madness in Novels”, 135; qtd. in Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 9-10). The anonymous reviewer assumes that such madness is most likely to spring out of passions such as love, jealousy, and hate (“Madness in Novels”, 135; qtd. in Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre*, 10). The reviewer considers that the nineteenth century is too ‘tame’ for such passions to erupt very often; if such perceptions were shared by other readers, this may have made Lady Audley’s actions appear even more extreme.

Despite the lack of solid proof for Lady Audley’s ‘madness’ in her actions or motivations, she is such a rebellious character that Braddon would have felt obliged to include a scene in which Lady Audley is punished or dies. Lady Audley may have been created as “a protest against the ‘passive and angelic, or insipid’ heroine” (Skilton, “Introduction”, xvii), but by creating such a figure, Braddon loads her novel with problems. Braddon faces the dilemma - noted by E.S. Dallas in two different reviews of

the novel - that if a woman is made the main focus of a novel, she cannot be insipid or passive, or the novel will be boring. But the only Victorian alternative to having an insipid literary heroine is to “give her up to bigamy, to murder”, which makes her appear “in a light which is not good” (Dallas, *The Gay Science* (1866), vol. 2, 297; see also E.S. Dallas, “Lady Audley’s Secret”, *Times*, 18 November, 1862, 8; both discussed in Skilton, *ibid.*, xvii). Braddon risks alienating readers by creating such an assertive heroine, or having her heroine be misunderstood. Elaine Showalter delineates the dilemma thus: Braddon wanted to create an assertive female character in order to highlight the difficulties faced by women in a male-dominated world. However, because Lady Audley never expresses regret for her sins (see Schipper, 55), her

unfeminine assertiveness must ultimately be defined as madness, not only to spare Braddon the unpleasant necessity of having to execute an attractive heroine ... but also to spare the woman reader the guilt of identifying with a coldblooded killer’ (Showalter, “Desperate Remedies”, 4).

It has been observed that Victorian bigamy novels allowed their readers to fulfil their “desire to sin and be forgiven vicariously” (Fahnestock, “Bigamy”, 48). If Braddon left Lady Audley uncaught or unpunished, this could perhaps mean that rather than being forgiven, the ‘sinning’ reader would unexpectedly be left in the situation of remaining unpunished and unrepentant.

Conclusion.

Recent readings of *Lady Audley’s Secret* usually feature a strongly feminist argument, and Elaine Showalter’s general comments about *Lady Audley’s Secret* probably remain the most cited observations about Braddon’s novel: Showalter concludes that “Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is *sane*, and moreover, representative” (Showalter, “Desperate Remedies”, 4). Braddon’s novel does itself suggest the accuracy of this idea, since Dr. Musgrove, the primary doctor asked to attest to Lady Audley’s madness, initially realises that Lady Audley is not mad, but rather, “dangerous”. Despite the appearance of several new readings of *Lady Audley’s Secret* in recent years, the readings provided by Elaine Showalter in the mid-1970s, and by David Skilton and Jill Matus some years ago, remain some the most thorough or useful readings in terms of understanding Lady Audley’s confinement. As all of these critics point out, given the events of the novel and elements of Lady Audley’s personality, it does not make much sense to regard her as suffering from any psychiatric condition. If Lady Audley is to be

considered ‘mad’, it is only in the sense that she does not conform to the ways that males in authority wish her to behave.²⁸⁸

As I have mentioned, many fictional texts use physical disability or mental disability to instigate conflict and the need to solve a problem (this method has been termed ‘narrative prosthesis’). *Lady Audley’s Secret* uses Lucy Audley’s ‘madness’ to reveal major problems relating to the opportunities afforded to young single middle-class women. Lady Audley’s violent and ‘crazy’ behaviour is socially unacceptable, yet is only a form of selfish individualism prompted by the circumstances she has been forced into. However, rather than recognize and deal with the problems that make life difficult for Lady Audley, those with social power perceive *Lady Audley* to be the ‘madness’ that needs to be ‘solved’. It is not difficult to see a parallel with how physically and mentally disabled people are often regarded today. Rather than deal with the issues of the disenfranchisement of the disabled or everyday obstacles and disadvantages they may face, able-bodied members of society often regard people with disabilities as themselves *being the problem* – people with disabilities are stigmatized and society feels little need to adapt the world to suit them. As we see in some other texts that utilize ‘narrative prosthesis’, Lady Audley’s ‘disabilities’, which are to a very large extent socially constructed, are seen to cause trouble, and eventually her ‘madness’ must be brought under control.

Braddon took the subject matter of *Lady Audley’s Secret* directly from the kinds of stories that dominated the news of the period: stories of bigamy and false representation, and of unfair confinement in lunatic asylums. That such stories of unfair confinement were widely current, and that this fear was ongoing, is evidenced by the 1858-1859 Lunacy Panic and by the 1869 *Cornhill* article I have referred to. The appropriation of such ‘true stories’ and current affairs as bases for fictional plots was particularly common amongst Victorian novelists, but Braddon reshapes the facts and bases of such stories to suit her own concerns.

It is clear that Lady Audley is punished for her assertiveness and her resistance to male control and that she can easily be considered sane. Nevertheless, part of the reason that she ends her days in the asylum in Villebrumeuse (382, 386-87) is because the

²⁸⁸ Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* claims that the real secrets of the sensation novel related to “women’s dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers” (158-59; qtd. in Schipper, *Becoming Frauds*, 96), and Jan Schipper concludes that “Braddon’s fiction cast the blame for disruptive women onto the paternalistic and class-conscious society that forced them to imitate the domestic ideal” (Schipper, 96). Kate Flint has suggested that proto-feminist sympathies toward women are the most frequently expressed subversive elements of the sensation genre (Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 276; qtd. in Schipper, 32).

statements she makes about herself either back up the concerns that other characters express about her mental state, or may even prompt them. Moreover, despite modern readers' scepticism, it is not entirely clear to what degree Lady Audley believes in her own 'insanity' or propensity toward it. Jan Schipper judges that Lady Audley uses "madness as a ruse", assuming "the role of madwoman rather than accept a fate in the gaol" (Schipper, 54). Going to an asylum is not ideal, but if Lady Audley admits to being sane, "then she must face criminal charges" (Schipper, 53-54). If such a reading is accepted, then one could view *Lady Audley's Secret* as repeating some of the plotline and concerns of *The Trail of the Serpent*.

Additionally, if Lady Audley's madness is a 'ruse', then in captivity, Lady Audley can be read as continuing a form of the feminine 'act' that she played when she was married to Sir Michael. When married to him, she presented herself as respectable, innocent, and 'babyfied'. In the asylum she plays the role of the hereditary madwoman, which can also be interpreted as another form of 'babyfication'. Despite the fact that by 'acting' the part of a madwoman, Lady Audley would be conforming to a stereotype, such acting would be a form of deception and therefore, in a way, a form of rebellion. However, this choice of role is a double-edged sword, since Lady Audley's madness is used against her. Perhaps one cannot regard *Lady Audley's Secret* as entirely transparent when it comes to whether Lady Audley does or does not really believe in or fear her own madness: "She may be mad. She may simply believe she is mad. Or she may be again practicing auto-ethnography, shaping her account to excuse her behaviour" (Rosner, "Domestic imperialism", 94).

Meanwhile, while the critic Jan Schipper feels that Braddon "placed the onus of women's madness on male domination" (Schipper, 54), Gail Houston suggests, "if there is a madness in this novel, it is masculine" (Houston, 26). For example, Harcourt Talboys believes that everything in life revolves around him (Houston, 26) and George Talboys leaves Helen Maldon (later Lucy/Lady Audley), apparently assuming "that her feelings for him will not change, even though, after abandoning her, he neglects to correspond with her for over three-and-a-half years". Houston suggests that such assumptions are "forms of masculine monomania" (Houston, 27).

Despite George's neglect of his wife, Robert displays a mania for catching and punishing this neglected wife, calling her "the most 'demoniac' of criminals" (292) (see Houston, 21). His monomania for punishing Lady Audley could actually be read as an indication of his "monomaniacal homosocial desire" (Houston, 27) – thus, what is

actually exposed in *Lady Audley's Secret* is male insecurity and male monomania. Ultimately, Robert's pursuit and unveiling of Lady Audley via the apparent authority of a psychiatrist simply reflects that various sensation texts, including *Lady Audley's Secret*, often incorporate into their formal structure "the disruptive qualities attached by male medicine to the female body and psyche". Thus, while "the male detective figure might fulfil the role of psychiatric authority in pursuing and unveiling female madness", "psychiatric pursuit of inner truth is figured in several texts as itself a form of madness" (Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 194).

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon shows how male characters unfairly label a female character 'mad', but also shows that this comes about not only as a response to the female character's troublesome behaviour but also as a partial result of her own concern with hereditary insanity. It remains unclear – likely purposely so – whether the text represents a madwoman who has fallen prey to her inherited tendency, or whether the text delivers a commentary upon the place of women in society and the way that female behaviour is interpreted.

Despite my certainty that *Lady Audley's Secret* does *not* represent Lady Audley as clinically insane, the novel is nevertheless seriously concerned with the concept of inherited traits. What is less certain is whether the novel views such concerns as valid or invalid. Given that Lucy Audley is *not* technically insane at the novel's end, but simply desperate and angry, the novel would seem to suggest that Lucy's belief in hereditary insanity is misguided, or at least that her obsessive near certainty that she will fall prey to the same insanity suffered by her mother has created a needless burden in her life. And yet her confinement results only from those actions she took to safeguard her financial well-being.

While the Victorian reading public might ultimately have judged Lady Audley 'mad' only in the sense of 'moral insanity', perhaps our own answers to the question of Lady Audley's sanity can never escape being subjective and may also be based largely on our *moral* judgement. Much of our reasoning behind whether we interpret Lady Audley as sane or insane probably lies in our *personal* response to her and whether we feel sympathy for her. Those who sympathize with Lady Audley's situation and can understand the motivations behind her actions would be loathe to regard her as insane, even if her actions are deceitful and destructive. Perhaps this is Braddon's point: to suggest that the decisions of the psychiatric community, while trumpeted as being founded on science and objectivity, are in fact often made based on 'impressions' of the

subject, and judgments about the subjects' behaviour that are *moral* rather than reflecting actual scientific data showing neurological or mental abnormality, or behavioural abnormalities that are permanent.

Moreover, *Lady Audley's Secret* was not the only sensation novel to make this suggestion. As Sally Shuttleworth explains, *Lady Audley's Secret* is a prime example of the group of sensation novels that responded to the rise of the social authority of psychiatry by expressing a distrust or a dissatisfaction with the level of power wielded by doctors and psychiatrists (Shuttleworth refers to "A Plea for Physicians", *Fraser's Magazine*, 37 (March 1848), 293; qtd. in Shuttleworth, "Preaching to the Nerves", 198). Within these novels, doctors frequently give "textbook diagnoses of protagonists, but their authority is often undermined". While "the language of psychiatry" is used by these texts, it is presented as being open "to interpretation" and the statements made by psychiatrists are no longer "taken at face value" (Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 193). At the same time that mental health professionals claimed to be able to accurately perceive the difference between the sane and the pathological, they also, paradoxically, began to suggest more often that there was no absolute divide between the normal and the pathological, and that "disease arose merely from an excess or deficiency of elements integral to normal functioning". What this implied was that anyone "could become insane by the slight movement into imbalance of his or her physiological and mental system" (Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 198). It is precisely this kind of concern that so occupies Lady Audley, as demonstrated when she confesses her past history to Sir Michael. She cites various instances when upsetting external events caused her to lose her mental balance – the first instance occurring soon after the birth of her child and her subsequent desertion by George Talboys: "I became subject to fits of violence and despair. At this time, I think my mind first lost its balance" (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 353). Although Lady Audley soon recovered from this instance of 'madness', she retained a conviction that she could potentially lose her grip on rationality in a moment.

While the diagnosis of mental illness was intrinsically a tool that could be subject to abuse, *Lady Audley's Secret* shows how this can be even more so when combined with other social elements that already disadvantage or victimize women. The diagnosis Lady Audley is given by Robert Audley and Doctor Mosgrave is literally intended to put her back in her place – to force her to live a "quiet and peaceful life" (391) – while also being used to uphold the male characters' opinions of themselves as powerful, correct, and normal (Shuttleworth, "Preaching to the Nerves", 204).

When sensation fiction mentioned issues related to women, it was often with the hope of achieving a practical effect: sensation writers – particularly Collins - often wrote ‘with a purpose’, hoping that mentioning concerns about the family and women’s place in it might ultimately help to change laws pertaining to women, or have a positive effect on the ways in which women were regarded. The question here is whether Braddon really was aiming for an ‘improving’ social effect. Considering that the commentaries and theorizing on the psychological and social construction of insanity is so complex in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, it seems fair to posit that Braddon did at least aim to question whether there could be any ‘certainty’ about how psychiatric diagnoses were made, and perhaps the real influence or even the existence of ‘hereditary insanity’.

Braddon’s novel is also upsetting in its suggestion that “The madness of unreason ... is the normal state of our psyches: we live in a constant state of imbalance, trying to suppress and disguise the rage within which we fulfil our expected roles” (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 210). Such an idea is suggested not only by Lady Audley’s behaviour, but also by Robert’s ‘monomania’. The passages in which Braddon asserts that *many* people live with this delicate balance between sanity and insanity appear to be tongue in cheek: “Mad-houses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange that they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this helpless persistency of the orderly outward world” (*Lady Audley’s Secret*, 205). Yet, despite the flippant tone employed, such pronouncements are in line with some of the ideas put forward by famous psychiatrists: “Madness, as Conolly and Barlow suggested, is the state that occurs when we let the social mask slip” (Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves”, 210).

What therefore makes *Lady Audley’s Secret* a provocative book - and what suggests the danger Lady Audley poses – are its three strongest suggestions: one, that perhaps every person has the potential to develop insanity; two, that every person has the potential to be *perceived as* insane, because ‘insanity’ is a relative and subjective term; and three, that “male sanity is assured only by the successful certification of female insanity” (see Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 204). Braddon’s novel sets at risk “the very possibility of authoritative interpretation” (Shuttleworth, *ibid.*, 204), because it “begs the question of whether insanity is a matter of appearance or a verifiable and fixed fact” (Bernstein, *Confessional Subjects*, 91). The uncertainty about Lady Audley’s madness is of course exacerbated by the fact that she is described as being only “intermittently” mad (Bernstein, 91), or as harbouring ‘latent’ insanity. The potential dubiousness of this idea

is mirrored in the response felt by the writer for the *Cornhill* when he is told such things about well-seeming patients of the French *maison de santé*, and almost the same concerns – without the focus on the victimization of women – were to appear in Charles Reade's novel *Hard Cash* (1863), in which the sane hero is confined in an asylum because the son holds information about the father's fraudulent behaviour and the father wishes to protect his financial position.²⁸⁹ The son is put in the asylum with the help of subjective readings by psychiatrists.

In *Lady Audley's Secret* Braddon moves toward a stance on 'insanity' that is remarkably similar to how contemporary disability theory stresses the constructivist nature of how we view disability: although modern society commonly views disabilities as 'impairments', disabilities are not completely 'innate' things, but rather, phenomena or conditions that are at least partly constructed and interpreted on the basis of factors in the social environment and on social values. *Lady Audley's Secret* clearly recognizes the power of discourse to make ideas or claims into accepted 'fact' simply via their pronouncement or repetition.

²⁸⁹ One could compare this to Robert Audley's wish to protect his own inheritance of the Audley estate.

GENERAL CONCLUSION: Representations of disability in the sensation novels of Collins and Braddon.

While the representations of physical and mental disability that appear in novels by the Victorian sensation novelists Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon are in some ways reflective of typically Victorian attitudes to the disabled, they are in many ways a great advancement upon other literary representations of disability from the period. They may be considered superior to other such representations on several grounds: their greater dedication to humanitarianism, the greater respect they show toward the disabled, the greater psychological realism in characterization, the scientific accuracy they aim for and often achieve in their representations of disability, their readiness to question and if necessary try to overturn common misconceptions about the disabled, their readiness to question categorizations, and their recognition – a very progressive one – that disability consists not just of physical or mental impairment, but that it is also constituted of social and environmental factors and that beliefs about disability can be altered by discourse. Collins and Braddon largely avoid repeating the common literary tropes about disability found in other novels of the period, because they instead engage in a remarkably complex sociological consideration of disability.

Wilkie Collins's representations of disabled characters show an increasingly complex understanding and depiction of how society forms discourses about disability and uses them to stigmatise the disabled or to control and repress social, mental, and physical difference. Collins's early novel *Hide and Seek* still retains some attachment to sentimental views of disability, although this is less obvious in the novel itself than in Collins's commentaries about the novel. Yet this novel also offers a remarkably innovative representation of a character who is deaf and mute. It delivers, in fact, English literature's first representation of such a subject, and shows the character, Madonna, both as a child and as an adult.

Harlan Lane, a modern-day disability theorist, suggests that the belief that disabled people should decide for themselves on matters that affect their lives is only a recent development brought about by gains made via the civil rights movement of the late twentieth century (see Lane, "Constructions of Deafness", 168). While this is true in general terms, as early as *Hide and Seek* Wilkie Collins expressed similar views in his fiction, as *Hide and Seek* supports Madonna's freedom to make decisions for herself about how she will communicate, and whether she will seek 'treatment' for her disability.

The Dead Secret demonstrates that Collins's interest in sensory disability was ongoing, and that he was not afraid to research and depict other forms of disability. His depiction of Leonard Frankland in this novel includes representing elements of Leonard's imaginative life, such as the way he retains images of Rosamond in his mind's eye. It also counteracts strongly entrenched myths about the paranoiac attitudes of blind men. As with Collins's representation of Madonna, Leonard is presented as a character to be empathized with, and is not an object of fear or pity.

In *The Dead Secret* Collins also represents what would have been a more mysterious and unfamiliar condition: a woman experiencing the effects of various severe traumas. While forms of mental illness and mental suffering had been represented in literature before, Collins's characterization of Sarah Leeson is innovative in the way that it locates precise psychological reasons for her anxiety. The representation also depicts in detail the psychologically debilitating effects of Sarah's trauma, as we are shown how Sarah's thinking is affected. Meanwhile, the novel also represents Sarah's continual trauma as having somatic effects, prompting an alteration in her appearance and causing a heart complaint. Because of the specificity of these details, one can argue that Collins's representation of Sarah is likely the earliest fictional representation of what is now termed post-traumatic stress disorder – a form of nervous response only just beginning to be researched at the time Collins wrote the novel.

In these two novels Collins had already gone against literary custom by casting disabled characters in two very central roles (in the case of *Hide and Seek*, actually in the heroine's role). He had also disregarded previous literary custom by presenting these characters as fully capable of feeling and inspiring romantic or sexual love. This was highly deliberate, a part of Collins's decision to represent the disabled as capable of leading happy and rewarding lives, instead of representing them as caught in misery and hopelessness. Another effect of Collins's depictions of disability is to prompt readers to reconsider the social barriers that they may imagine exist between the able-bodied and the disabled. For example, in a later novel, *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins shows his blind heroine and epileptic hero marrying and having children, disregarding fears of blindness or epilepsy being passed on to the children.

Collins showed an unusual degree of interest in researching the disabilities he was to represent. He realised that if he was to break the mould of past sentimentalized or inaccurate representations, he could only do so once properly informed about recent scientific research into those conditions, about past literary representations of them, and,

when possible, appraised of the experiences of real people who had such disabilities. Collins's first serious representation of a sensory disability in *Hide and Seek* is powerful precisely because of its reliance the descriptions of sensory experiences and feelings about deafness and mutism provided by John Kitto in his memoir *The Lost Senses*. In *Poor Miss Finch*, too, Collins's scientific sources are evident because of certain details provided in the text's descriptions of eye surgery and in its discussions of psychological effects experienced by Lucilla while blind and once she has become sighted. That this representation was not particularly appreciated by the literary establishment at the time, or in popular opinion for many years afterward, is probably an indicator of how unusual his achievements were.

Many Collins novels recognize the social and legal factors that oppress women, and represent strong women fighting against these factors. In *The Law and the Lady* Collins combines his interest in physical and mental disability with his interest in social factors that disadvantage women, and posits Victorian womanhood as a form of disability. By examining and revealing as inadequate, misleading, and oppressive the discourses used to denigrate and isolate Dexter, Collins simultaneously suggests that the social rules that position women as socially disabled and label them as 'monsters' if they defy such rules, are also unfair or flawed. Meanwhile, the negative stigma attached to women's 'curiosity' is also shown to be unfair, as Valeria's quest for further knowledge leads to greater justice for everyone.

In addition to examining how *The Law and the Lady* suggests that womanhood is a disability, my chapter on *The Law and the Lady* focused on elucidating points about Miserrimus Dexter's disabilities and issues relating to his representation that have not been fully explored by previous critics. These include explaining how Dexter's representation draws on numerous psychological theories of the nineteenth century, including ideas related to 'moral management' and theories of degeneration. I have also filled gaps in academic scholarship by discussing Dexter's representation in *The Graphic*, naming the illustrator of the serialized pictures, discussing Richard Dadd as a possible inspiration for Dexter's characterization, and showing how Dexter is linked to Sara Macallan and to Valeria via the discourses of monstrosity.

A few years ago, Kate Flint remarked that it seems the main point Collins wanted to communicate in his portraits of the disabled was the *lack* of real difference between the disabled and the able-bodied – the degree to which the disabled and the able-bodied share many emotions and experiences. She suggests that Collins does not merely

reproduce the typical Victorian disability narratives that aimed to generate sympathy and affect. Instead, Collins's focus on "the vocabulary of sensory cognition" allows his readers to reflect thoughtfully on "the role of the senses in everyday perception". His depictions of disability make "us acknowledge and reflect on the part which our own bodies play in our interpretative strategies" (Flint, "Disability and Difference", 157). Lastly, as is apparent from the discussions throughout my thesis, although Collins *does* show an interest in 'impairment', Collins's real interest "lies not in bodily impairment as such, but in its psychological effects. In turn, these impact on, and are influenced by, emotions which are experienced by able-bodied and disabled alike" (Flint, 165).

Flint's observations about how Collins's work reduces the 'difference' between the able-bodied and the disabled seem the more correct the more one examines his representations of disability. However, we could add to these observations by noting that Collins's novels involving depictions of disability not only question the binaries of disabled and able-bodied and of sane and insane, but expose to questioning other discourses by which Victorian society sought to create binaries separating the 'good' from the 'bad', the socially acceptable and obedient from the socially 'deviant' or dangerous. Collins's work shows a strong drive toward deconstructing these discourses, reclaiming as acceptable some of those who had been marked as deviant – whether it be prostitutes (*The New Magdalen*), people of mixed heritage (*Armadale*), people with facial disfigurements (*Poor Miss Finch*), people of unusual physical stature (Pesca in *The Woman in White*), or people with sensory disabilities and psychological eccentricities and pathologies. His interest in disability is linked to his wider concern for social justice, as he also wrote frequently about other groups of people who were marginalised by society.

Collins's attempt to dismantle some of the boundaries between disabled bodies and minds and more socially normative bodies and minds can be linked to his criticism of other forms of social hierarchy and control. His fiction repeatedly stresses the similarities between people whom others might presume to be very different. Two people from completely different social backgrounds or classes may share similarities of behaviour or belief, or be affected by similar concerns. In *The Dead Secret*, Leonard advises his wife Rosamond to always be mindful of "those distinctions in rank on which the whole well-being of society depends". However, Rosamond's response to this is to ask:

"Does it really? And yet, dear, we don't seem to have been created with such very wide distinctions between us. We have all got the same number of arms

and legs; we are all hungry and thirsty, and hot in the summer and cold in the winter; we all laugh when we are pleased, and cry when we are distressed; and surely, we have all got very much the same feelings, whether we are high or whether we are low" (*The Dead Secret*, 73).

While Rosamond's comment ostensibly ties only to the question of class hierarchy and whether to be friendly to one's social 'inferiors', her comment can apply to other forms of social hierarchy - indeed it *is* applied in this way in *The Dead Secret*, as Rosamond accepts a mother who is affected by a psychological disorder.

Collins's levelling strategies go even further than this, as he also points out similarities between people who *do* have (for example) differing numbers of arms or legs, or differing abilities to use their eyes and ears. Collins's support of more democratic forms of social interaction and more progressive political administration is on a par with his support for changes to repressive beliefs about women, and with the sympathy and empathy his novels extend toward the physically and mentally disabled. Thus Collins's fiction begins tearing down the more fallacious 'boundaries' between the able-bodied and the disabled that distort social perceptions of the disabled. His narratives expose ways in which able-bodied characters' viewpoints of the disabled have often been socially constructed and may be misperceptions, often influenced by traditional myths or by medical and psychological terminologies, rather than by actual knowledge about the disabled person's thought and experience. Collins achieves this by placing disabled characters at the centres of his fiction and by stressing the similarities of their concerns and feelings with those of the able-bodied. At times, he does describe the more unusual psychological effects of the character's disability, but even then, this is in order to make the disability more understandable to the reader. Therefore, as Kate Flint suggests, the general tendency of Collins's depictions of disability is to stress that there is a *lack of distinction* between "the disabled and the normally-bodied" (Flint, "Disability and Difference", 156), a message conveyed via the methods mentioned above, by showing disabled characters engaged in "affective relationships" (Flint, 164), and by disrupting the idea that various taxonomies and categories are self-evident.

Collins's representations of disability are also unusual in other regards. First, it is very seldom that Collins depicts a disabled character as a figure of comedy – and when he does, for example, with his depictions of the cognitively disabled characters Mrs. Wragge (in *No Name*) and Ariel (in *The Law and the Lady*), they are not looked down on, but rather accorded sympathy as Collins makes it clear that they are mistreated by others who take advantage of their disability and act in ways that may exaggerate its effects.

Another unusual feature of Collins's fiction is that it does not hold it inevitable that a disabled body indicates disabled cognition or a diseased mentality. In *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins shows obvious interest in the idea that these two things could coincide. However, the link between the two is not presented as assured. Moreover, in some instances, his fiction questions the reality or presence of mental pathology by pointing out how it may be indistinguishable from mere eccentricity, imagination, free-thinking, or bravery (as in the case of Valeria). Collins does appear to agree that bodies contain "stories about an individual's life, habits, heredity, or emotions" (Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 8), as indicated by the premature grey hair suffered by Sarah Leeson as the result of trauma, and by Dexter's degenerating appearance. What Collins does seem to question is how doctors positioned themselves "as privileged interpreters of those stories" and as the only ones who could understand and reveal "social and scientific 'truths'" (Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 8-9). In Collins's novels, medical doctors and psychiatrists or people espousing psychological theories quite often turn out to be wrong, or have their beliefs undermined.

Meanwhile, Collins's decision to depict disabled characters actively interacting with their environment and with social groups is also unusual. The disability theorist David T. Mitchell notes that when disability appears in fiction, it "rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency" (Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis", 23). Representations of the disabled generally ascribe "absolute singularity to disability", to the detriment of the representation, as this ascription gets in the way of considering any political or social aspects of their lives (Mitchell, *ibid.*, 16). Here, again, Collins's work is impressive. Even though Collins does not usually locate disabled characters within a 'constituency', in some of the novels discussed here, he does depict how the disabled characters engage with their social environment. Some of his disabled characters are well-adjusted, active and quite independent. Some, like Madonna Blyth have loving, or reasonably positive, support networks. Others are depicted as socially disadvantaged and find it much harder to cope within society. All have to contend with the fact that they are living in a world designed for able-bodied people.

Collins's representations of disability were highly influenced by his interest in science. This influence manifests itself, for example, when he focuses on the limitations disabilities may cause to a character's mobility, or on the sensorial limitations and psychological affects that disabilities may prompt. However, as I mentioned earlier, Collins was also interested in social justice, so another major influence on Collins's

representations of disability is sheer humanitarian concern. This humanitarianism is displayed when Collins includes such details, as in *Hide and Seek*, as when Valentine and Lavinia Blyth include Madonna in their conversations, even ensuring that trivial snippets of conversation are related to her. Similarly, in *The Dead Secret*, Rosamond is given the opportunity to hide information from her blind husband. The information would be detrimental to her if shared, but Rosamond chooses to reveal it, and is rewarded for doing so. This incident communicates the need to respect the disabled and to encourage inclusive communication so that everyone is on the same level. Collins posits such egalitarianism as the most acceptable method of human interaction.

Apart from delivering representations of disability that are more scientifically informed than previous such depictions, and creating representations of disabled characters that are particularly well-rounded, Collins's novels also hint at how various individuals and even various elements of social structures work together to suppress or stigmatize certain social groups, and so reveal that the aura of difference attached to the disabled is only maintained via the active perpetuation of stigmas. Once such processes are exposed, the message is conveyed that perhaps people with disabilities are not really 'the Other'.

Although I have not focused to the same degree on the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, I have attempted to make conspicuous the fact that her novels also communicate unexpected messages about disability, whether this be via her positive representation of a mute working-class man and the representation's implicit support of sign language, or the way that she displays her understanding of sociopathic characters by making explicit how social forces push them to adopt such behaviour and delineating the processes by which other characters detect or frame their sociopathy. In *Lady Audley's Secret* she also, I argue, questions the need for all of the anxiety surrounding hereditary insanity.

Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent* is remarkable for being a very early detective novel, but even more remarkable for its use of the mute detective and its support for forms of communication that are alternatives for oral speech. Braddon presents Peters's mutism as not being a particularly severe or debilitating disability, but as offering the opportunity to develop other senses and skills. She presents sign language as valid and practical and the reading of body language as another form of specialized knowledge. She also undermines the value that society places on forms of individualist endeavour, thus prefiguring disability studies' call to fight discourses that champion only independence

and devalue any form of human dependency or interdependency. Social devaluations of disability are often linked to the perception that the disabled are helpless, unable to achieve on their own. In *The Trail of the Serpent*, Braddon shows that Peters is not incapable and can in fact be a very valuable employee. However, she also implies that there are advantages to be gained from teamwork and interdependency. Peters's sociable acceptance of help from others contrasts with Jabez North's rigid self-reliance, lack of concern for others, and inability to work honestly. This contrast suggests that Peters's is not the real disability: Jabez North's selfishness and lack of social literacy is the truly debilitating condition.

In *Lady Audley's Secret* Braddon once more portrays some of the actions and motivations of a morally insane individual. But this time, her sociopath is much less of a villain, and Braddon does not so much suggest Lady Audley's 'insanity' as locate insanity within society. The text makes Lady Audley's frustrations clear and shows that others' descriptions of her mental state are manipulative. *Lady Audley's Secret* shows how a woman is acceptable as long as she plays the role of pretty, childlike, passive femininity, and shows the consequences that can follow upon rebelling against such expectations. With her representations of Jabez North and Lady Audley, we are left to wonder to what degree Jabez and Lady Audley are to blame for their 'moral insanity' and to what degree their mental aberrance is a by-product of the pressures exerted by society. While the deliberation behind Jabez's choice to act in a way we would now term sociopathic is highly obvious, the manifestation of sociopathic behaviour in Lady Audley is more ambiguous, complicated by questions about the reality of hereditary insanity and by the greater level of restrictions Lady Audley faces in terms of gender. *Lady Audley's Secret* also questions the honesty of some psychiatric doctors, and points out that the diagnosis of insanity is a questionable concept, not only due to the possibility of misdiagnoses and the subjectivity of psychiatric analyses, but because the concept of 'insanity' is itself unstable, with the perception of insanity being affected by a variety of factors such as social norms, gender restrictions, and the maintenance of the class hierarchy.

Braddon's treatment of insanity in *Lady Audley's Secret* has much in common with Collins's treatment of the same subject in *The Woman in White* (as Jenny Bourne Taylor notes, in *Lady Audley's Secret* there is an "absence of any stable reference point for defining insanity" (Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre*, 11)), and *The Law and the Lady* similarly undercuts the boundaries between sanity and insanity, the rational and the

irrational. As we have seen, Collins is able to weave the questioning of insanity into his discussions of other issues, such as disability, femininity, and gender roles. While Taylor's assertion that Collins's "use of insanity as a narrative strategy is more complex than that of any of his contemporaries" (Taylor, *ibid.*, 10) is likely true, and while Braddon's representations of mental illness and sociopathic behaviour are generally more melodramatic than those of Collins, they, like his, are also extremely nuanced for their time period, and show an awareness of how social and medical discourses about mental illnesses are constructed.

In this this thesis, I have not had much space to comment on representations of disability in the works of mainstream Victorian writers. However, the writings of Collins and Braddon show several advancements upon the representations of disability delivered by these writers. These advancements lie in terms of how they encourage empathy and sympathy for the disabled without dwelling on sentimental aspects of their disabilities or encouraging pity, but rather by encouraging identification and improved education about disability. The novels by Collins and Braddon that I discuss here do not replicate ableist myths about disability but are instead innovative in terms of their dedication to scientific realism and to representing the psychology of their characters. Their representations of disability question assumptions about disabled persons' capacities, and question the categorizations of able-bodied and disabled. As Julia Miele Rodas has pointed out, Dickens never creates intimacy with his disabled characters, and the commentaries about his disabled characters are generally funnelled through a narrator (see Rodas, "Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha"). Martha Stoddard Holmes has also viewed Collins's representations of disabled characters as a significant advance on those by Dickens (see Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 90-93).

There is no reason why the examination of disabled characters must be confined to the sensation novel. However, the sensation genre probably does contain the most interesting and fully-rounded representations of disability in Victorian fiction. This is partly due to sensation fiction's particular interest in medical, scientific or sociological topics that had a bearing on physical, mental, or social disability. The genre stands out for its greater acceptance of the disabled as people who have a place in general society, rather than as regarding them as inferior or deviant. Sensation novels are less likely to depict the disabled through paradigms of pathos or fear (unless doing so to point out limitations of such paradigms).

The literary study of representations of disability in the sensation novel could be developed further by examining a wider range of works by Collins and Braddon, or by also focusing on works by other sensation writers – the most interesting representations of physical and mental disability are likely to be found in the works of Charles Reade, Ellen Wood, Lucas Malet, and Sheridan Le Fanu. In recent years Victorian scholars have also begun to consider representations of disability in the works of other Victorian writers who are not sensation novelists but who have also remained outside the canon, such as Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Mulock Craik.

While I have considered the novels by Collins and Braddon discussed here within a specifically mid-Victorian social and scientific context, I have also considered them in the light of various concepts sourced from modern-day disability theory. I found that in many regards these works by Collins and Braddon actually prefigure some of the claims made or conclusions reached about disability that are put forward by today's disability theorists. Disability studies aims to disrupt ideas and assumptions about bodies and their social relations and to question the preference that society so commonly expresses for the 'normal', the 'average', or the 'perfect' body, or for perfect mental health. Modern western societies seem to endorse somatic and mental hierarchies that range from the 'beautiful', complete and perfect at the 'top', to the damaged, maimed, impaired and disabled at the bottom. This differentiation and arrangement into a perceived hierarchy was already in effect in nineteenth century Britain, and it is exactly this hierarchy and its divisions that Collins and Braddon question.

Disability studies questions such hierarchical ways of thinking, and even disputes the reality of the binary of 'disabled' and 'able-bodied'. Instead, it tends to view disability and ability as existing on a continuum which individuals move along throughout their lives. Another idea posited by some disability theorists is that every person in the world is 'disabled', as surely no one has a body or mind that is in exact accordance with cultural ideals. Meanwhile, amongst various groups of people whom most in western society would regard as disabled – such as people who are deaf, or even, people who are blind – there are some individuals who do not regard themselves as disabled at all. Examination of the texts by Collins and Braddon covered here shows that in some of their novels disabled characters reject ascriptions of pathology or difference. Meanwhile, in others, a disabled character sometimes embraces being 'disabled', seeing it as a part of their identity. Collins and Braddon both show an awareness of the complexity of discourses surrounding disability and of the inequity or falsity of some social and

medical attitudes toward it. The representations of disability by Collins in many regards resemble modern-day ideas of the ‘social construction’ of disability, as Collins shows that some of the disadvantages faced by physically or mentally disabled characters (or those deemed deviant or different), are *not* in fact located in their sensory or mental disability, but caused or exacerbated by social factors or by how other people treat them. These works by Collins and Braddon attempt to dispel misleading ideas about the disabled that lead to their social stigmatization, their pathologization, or that encourage people to regard them as pitiable, and thus their aims are similar – if not identical – to the aims of the modern disability rights movement and the discipline of disability studies, which fight against public policies and social attitudes that lead to the stigmatization, social isolation, and political disenfranchisement of the disabled. The correspondences between issues raised in Collins’s and Braddon’s work and those dealt with by disability studies today suggest not only that such interests are of enduring humanitarian importance, but that some of the problems relating to disability pointed out by Collins and Braddon were never fully resolved, or not resolved in equitable ways.

Disability studies continues to develop as a discipline, and thus the ways in which one can study representations of disability in the sensation novel may also change. Both disability studies and Victorian studies have been strongly influenced by feminism, so it is possible that further developments in feminist theory or gender studies may provide more tools for considering representations of disability. Both fields may also develop in future through the further annexation of ideas sourced from queer theory, another form of ‘identity politics’ that is particularly relevant to disability theory, since it too examines the perception and representation of ‘difference’ and consequent forms of stigmatization or social repression. The queer theorist Robert McRuer has called for “an alliance between queer theory and critical disability” in order to affirm, strategically, that “the two activities are in many ways of a piece” (McRuer, “As Good as It Gets”, 97; see also Free, “Freaks That Matter”, 275). Judith Butler has also pointed out the potential of allying queer theory to the analysis of Victorian literature; by doing so we “can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 4; qtd. in Free, 275).

Queer theory appears to be a particularly relevant tool for criticism of sensation fiction, since many works by Collins and Braddon (and some works by Charles Reade) show an interest in structures of power and in the ways that ideas of the normative and non-normative are constituted and perpetuated. Some recent criticism relating to Wilkie

Collins has in fact utilized ideas relating to queer theory, and to the prevalence of ‘freakery’ in Victorian Britain. Scholars have related Collins’s work to the freak show or have identified freakery in Collins’s plots via the way his characters disrupt conventional gender roles and appearances. For example, Melissa Free uses elements of queer theory to discuss Collins’s character Ezra Jennings (from *The Moonstone*) in her article “Freaks That Matter”, while Martha Stoddard Holmes’s discussion of Miserrimus Dexter in her article “Queering the Marriage Plot” also utilizes ideas sourced from queer theory.

The further development of the study of representations of disability in sensation novels could also be aided by recent critical investigations of the interaction between Victorian literature and fields of Victorian science. Recent works by Gillian Beer, Sally Shuttleworth, Rick Rylance, William Cohen, Nicholas Dames, and Anne Stiles, among others, has thrown some new light on such interactions and on how “literary texts opened up the silences of science [...] commenting upon, and often challenging the formulations of the newly emerging scientific domain” (Shuttleworth, “The Psychology of Childhood”, 101).

Over the last twenty years or so, the field of cognitive literary theory has emerged. Future developments in this field of knowledge and in neuroscience or biology could have huge consequences for the further study of disability in sensation fiction. Since cognitive literary theory is concerned with issues relating to perception, sensory processes, and evolutionary processes, it seems very likely that cognitive literary theory shall exert increasing influence on disability studies – and, at some points throughout this thesis my own readings have been influenced by such theory. There has also been an emergence in recent years of an increasing number of academic studies of emotion, sentimentality, sympathy, empathy, affect, and the neurological effects of reading, which have frequently engaged with Victorian literary texts. While my own readings of works by Collins and Braddon have generally been grounded in disability theory, feminist theory, and new historicist analysis, I have also tried to take some notice of these growing fields and at times incorporated observations from such studies.

Considering that Collins and Braddon did not have access to the range of psychological, psychiatric, and neurological knowledge that we have today, and that they wrote well before the emergence of any modern civil rights philosophy, the degree to which their writings anticipate the concerns and theories of Disability Studies – or sometimes reach *exactly the same* conclusions – is truly remarkable. Collins and Braddon were only able to represent disabled characters in such a complex and vivid

fashion due to their dedication to acquiring scientific knowledge, their dedication to humanitarian ideals, and their readiness to regard those with disabilities as being equal to the able-bodied.

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²⁹⁰ This list includes all of the works and sources I have cited within my thesis, and also a very small selection of other works I consulted and found useful while writing the thesis.

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