The Intersection of Disability and Romance in Nineteenth-Century Literature

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For Uncle Michael

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Introduction

This is a thesis about disability in Victorian fiction. However, I will look at disability in a way that may seem unexpected. When people think of characters with disabilities in nineteenth-century fiction, we might assume that they picture a sentimental, asexual, child character like that of Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol* (1843). We assume that characters with disabilities are side characters, one-dimensional, and have no romantic capabilities. However, a fuller examination of Victorian literature yields numerous examples of characters with disabilities that are not the small orphan type of character, but actually characters that are extremely varied and complex. What may be the most surprising, and therefore the primary focus of my argument, is that characters with disabilities in nineteenth-century literature are not asexual or separated from the marriage plot as many would be inclined to believe, but in fact, I come to the conclusion that disability is central to a character's ability to find love and romance within their stories.

In order to better understand how our preconceived ideas around disability in literature are so different from what I outline in my thesis, it may be helpful to start with understanding the difference between how disability was viewed in the nineteenth century compared to modern day. Today, the term disability is a word to define a mental or physical condition that limits movements or everyday activity. During the nineteenth century, the connotation around disability was different as illness, death, and disability were more ubiquitous in society.[1] Victorians constantly moved between health and illness due to differences in medical interventions and therefore disability was in large, more apparent. People with disabilities lived

[1]Clare Walker Gore observes that "the term 'disabled' was not used then as it is now; when applied to characters in a nineteenth-century novel, it is necessarily anachronistic" (Gore 1). Two authors, Lakshmi Krishnan, and Kari Nixon, help add to what Gore observes in their article "Roundtable: Outbreak: Contagion and Culture in the Victorian Era" which highlights the prevalence of illness in Victorian literature. They explain how "One could hardly read a Victorian text without encountering contagious disease, those striving against them, or those marked by them: from tuberculous resonance in *Dracula* (1897) to *Bleak House's* Esther, disfigured by smallpox" (Krishnan and Nixon 276).

at “all levels of society, from the meanest dens of vagabonds to the highest circle of the elite and the royal court” (“A History of Disability: From 1050 to the Present Day”). In the late seventeenth century, while the vast majority of people with disabilities lived in family homes as care work was primarily handled within the family, increasing numbers of people with disabilities were housed in institutions (Braddock and Parish 25). Hospitals were becoming more popular and expanding during this time as well. The infamous Royal Bethlehem, or Bethlem, London’s asylum for the mad, notorious for their horrible treatment of their patients, was rebuilt in the 1670s, and hospitals housing invalids began to pop up all across London (Andrews et al. 146).

In the nineteenth century, the growth of asylums boomed. Reformers believed that asylums were safer places for “lunatics,” as the institutions had more resources to provide cures and treatments. By the end of the century, 120 new asylums had been built, housing more than 100,000 patients in total (“A History of Disability: From 1050 to the Present Day”). Asylums became places of confinement as more and more people were funneled into institutions, where conditions were cramped and difficult. Another trend of the nineteenth century was the development of workhouses (Bartlett 425). Following the 1834 Poor Law Act, which focused on the reduction of parish relief for able-bodied people through the use of workhouses, new workhouses designed to root out “shirkers and scroungers” were created, housing many people with both physical and mental disabilities (Wright 11). As more people with disabilities moved into asylums and workhouses, attitudes in the nineteenth century began to change. Community members began to become wary of providing financial relief to individuals in their own homes as it was believed to encourage laziness.

As time progressed, people with disabilities continued to face discrimination and mistreatment. As a result, disability studies began to emerge in the late twentieth century as the disability rights movement began to find success (Ferguson 71). Due to centuries of biased assumptions, harmful stereotypes, and irrational fears, people with disabilities faced social and economic marginalization. In response, around the 1960s in the United Kingdom, the disability movement began to advocate for equal access and equal opportunity for people with disabilities (Armstrong 552). The movement achieved marked success in America with legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 and, later, the Equality Act of 2010, which protects people with disabilities against discrimination (Hepple 11).

In the wake of the development of critical disability studies, literary scholars have been interested in how disability plays a role in Victorian literature.[2] A pioneer of disability studies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains how "disability has long been studied within the applied health sciences, where it is still largely framed as a medical problem needing a medical solution….critical disability studies sought to both correct and expand the way health sciences framed disability" (Thomson 915). Thus, the task of critical disability theory is to analyze disability through a cultural, historical, and social lens.[3] In *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel,* Clare Walker Gore offers a framework that exemplifies how scholars have begun

[2] Since the 1990s, critical disability studies has gained attention in the disability studies community as a favoring way to discuss disabilities when looking at texts or real life. For more information on critical disability theory look at Kellie Herson's article "Transgression, Embodiment, and Gendered Madness: Reading Homeland and Enlightened through Critical Disability Theory" and the anthology *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Policy, and Land* (2006).

[3] Critical disability theory is just one way of looking at disability. Two other popular models for looking at disability are the medical model of disability and Crip theory. The medical model of disability focuses on how people are disabled by their impairments or differences. Many scholars have turned away from this model as it emphasizes low expectations for people with disabilities, as well as a loss of independence (Marks 85). Crip theory is more similar to critical disability theory as "Instead of framing disability as a problem of individual bodies, where the solution to difference is found in often deeply harmful rehabilitation and intervention, disability studies and Crip theory allow for a more critical and expansive look at disability as an aspect of identity and culture that holds inherent value" (Hanebutt and Mueller 5). Crip theory also emphasizes the intersection between disability studies and queer theory, focusing on how ability affects social pressures and norms around gender and sexuality.

to develop a discourse that expands how we look at disability. Gore argues that by "plotting disabled characters across the field of Victorian fiction, [she had] discovered them in the act of performing an astonishing variety of narrative work, the social identity arising from their impairments actually enabling them to play a host of necessary plot roles" (Gore 4). Gore challenges the modern idea of disability within literature and shows how disability in Victorian fiction serves as a way for authors to create interesting dynamics between characters and explore how disability can shape relationships.

Similar to Gore, many critics have begun to challenge and expand the ways disability in literature is portrayed.[4] I am particularly interested in looking at how disability scholarship has expanded to investigate the intersection between disability and romance. One author who begins to unpack this relationship is Talia Schaffer. Schaffer's *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* argues that non-desiring relationships pervade nineteenth-century literature. She explains how the category she calls "familiar marriage" is a "Victorian literary convention that developed out of the eighteenth-century ideal of marrying from rational esteem rather than romantic love" (Schaffer 2). In these relationships, the motive to get married was not passion or love, but because marriage offered an advantage to one or both members of the couple. Schaffer breaks familiar marriage into four categories: neighbor marriage, cousin marriage, disability marriage, and vocational marriage. Through these four types of marriages, Schaffer argues that it has the ability to offer "social empowerment, familial benefit, caretaking networks, or career access" (Schaffer 9). One example of these benefits is how in a disability marriage, "for a lonely

[4] Although I primarily focus on the ways disability in literature has been looked at more deeply regarding romance, scholars have been interested in the different ways disability plays a role in literature. One example of how disability is looked at in Victorian literature is in Etan Bar-Yosef's article "The "Deaf Traveler," the "Blind Traveler," and Constructions of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing" where he looks at travelers with disabilities and what it can tell us about notions of disability, normalcy and travel.

person, a disabled partner could be the entry into a ready-made world, offering the intimate community ties for which so many Victorians yearned" (Schaffer 160). In contrast to a modern view which considers marriages without love as backward or humiliating, familiar marriage in nineteenth-century literature was used as a way to benefit individuals or pairings of characters. Examining Victorian literature through Schaffer's perspective helps reveal that disability was viewed as an impermeable barrier that excluded individuals from participating in what we would think of as the traditional marriage plot. However, these individuals still found themselves in marriage stories, albeit in a non-romantic way.

In *Communities of Care,* Schaffer expands her argument about disability marriage in *Romance's Rival*, highlighting a trend in Victorian literature where individuals with disabilities form networks of "communities of care" through relationships between caretakers. Schaffer defines caring as "an action rather than a feeling, and …argue[s] for caregiving as one of the most fundamental forms of human relationality" (Schaffer 28). Using this idea, she explains how within Victorian fiction, characters with disabilities attract groups of people who care for one another, either physically or emotionally, which becomes beneficial to all involved. A care community consists of personal relationships and features "histories, friendships, rivalries, loves, and mentorship" that allows for decentralized support networks. Schaffer ultimately shows how disability is not a limiting agent, but actually deepens the conventional notion of relationships by forming partnerships that provide advantages and or care communities.

In a related argument, Karen Bourrier analyzes the role disability plays in Victorian friendship narratives. Bourrier notices a trend in Victorian literature that involves the pairing of a strong hero and weak man. She explains how "[there is a] strong hero, who is mainly distinguished by his athletic prowess, [and a] weak or disabled man [who is] physically distinct

and able to articulate his feelings, [and able to] narrate those of his stronger friend" (Bourrier 2). Bourrier argues that the dynamic often develops between rivals or friends, where the weak man in relation to the protagonist is used as a way to either highlight the strength of the hero or be a burden to the hero's talents. While Schaffer argued that disability marriage was used as a way to create a community of care, thus elevating people's relationship with one another, Bourrier sees disability as more of a way to generate sympathy and unequal power dynamic: "a physical disability would engender mental suffering, both for the person with a disability and for the onlookers who sympathized with him" (Bourrier 4). An example of the sort of pairings that Bourrier is looking at is between Tom and Philip in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) (adversaries) and Nicholas Nickleby and Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) (friendship). The antagonistic or protective nature of the hero/weak man relationship is used as a narrative tool to prop up or limit the hero's character. Elsewhere, Bourrier theorizes "two potential plots related to deformity: on the one hand, having a deformity could isolate a man by making him feel set apart from his fellow human beings, or, it could bring him into closer communion with his fellow men through identification with the suffering of all men" (Bourrier 1). Together, the Schaffer framework and Bourrier's argument see disability as a narrative tool to create relationships, rather than just a marker of a minor or villainous character.

However, while these literary critics recognize the importance of disability in relationships, even marriage, they still overlook the ways disability intersects in romantic relationships and how authors have used disability to create and allow for romance. I am specifically interested in investigating the gap in the scholarly conversation that overlooks the romantic capabilities of characters with disabilities. Scholars, like Gore, Schaffer, and Bourrier, begin to expand the idea that people with disabilities can play dynamic roles in relationships,

however, they do not go as far as to challenge the stereotype that people with disabilities are asexual. I will add to these scholars' work to highlight how characters with disabilities are not always portrayed as asexual, and that by looking through popular Victorian literature, it is actually the case where disability makes a character *better* fit for a love marriage, not worse. In my thesis, I will describe what I term the "disability-romance plot" and provide examples that best illustrate how the plot is used in order to show how disability is central for allowing for romantic relationships in nineteenth-century literature. The disability-romance plot is what I call the pattern of authors using disability as a mechanism to solve otherwise unsolvable conflicts within romantic pairings. There are two distinct forms of the disability-romance plot that emerge within nineteenth-century literature: the first is the "male disability-romance plot" in which a male character is the one that becomes disabled, and the second is the "female disability-romance plot" in which a female character becomes disabled. In the first chapter, I will focus on the male disability-romance plot and in the second I will focus on the female plot.

The male disability-romance plot follows a set pattern: a male character, the love interest, experiences a tragic event, becomes disabled, and, as a result, becomes better fit to be a romantic partner. What occurs is that two characters are prevented from being together because of differences in their social status and varying levels of attraction to each other. The man is often an arrogant bachelor figure whose personality conflicts with any romantic leads. A relationship between the two characters is initially socially unacceptable because the female character has a lower social rank than the man. However, toward the end of the novel, the male character gets into an accident that leaves him with a disability. Along with a physical change as a result of his disability, the male character undergoes a personal transformation that renders him more moral and more open to a relationship. The female is also able to take on a new role as a caretaker,

elevating her status. Together, there is a balancing of roles where the woman's status is elevated and the man, through his dependence on the woman, is humbled. Now on equal terms, the couple is able to act on their affection for one another (an affection which pre-dates the disability). Overall, the plot relies on the author using disability as a tool to enable a romance between an unlikely pair.

The female disability-romance plot shares some characteristics with the pattern seen in the male plot. The couple still begins unable to be with each other and the female character, like the male romantic character, is humbled by her disability and ultimately transformed into a better partner. However, unlike the male disability plot, where every male character starts out in a high economic position and is arrogant, the female characters are more varied. Female characters do not experience disability in the same way as seen in the male disability plot. While many experience sickness or physical disability, the prevalence of mental disability is seen throughout the texts. The difference between the variations on the disability-romance plot ultimately reflects the intersectionality between gender and disability. The point of the disability-romance plot is to make a character through disability a better fit for their romantic interest. However, for women, Victorian authors had a more variable idea about what that ideal feminine character should look like. Therefore, what stands out about the female disability-romance plot is that a woman gets into an accident or in another way becomes disabled, where she is then made into the specific ideal match for her potential romantic partner. This looks different for every book: a woman might become more childlike due to her disability or more intelligent. The female disability-romance plot demonstrates that the period’s ideals of women are in flux. Rather than conforming to a single pattern, authors take it upon themselves to use disability to transform women into a range of ideals.

I will first begin Chapter One by laying out the male disability-romance plot using *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) by Charles Dickens and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë as primary texts that showcase the male disability-romance plot. I will also look at the *Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) by Charlotte Mary Yonge and *Olive* (1850) by Dinah Craik to reinforce the ideas. I will then turn to the female disability-romance plot in Chapter Two which focuses on three texts, *Persuasion* (1817) by Jane Austen, *The Woman in White* (1859) by Wilkie Collins, and ending on *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) by Charlotte Yonge. In each text, I will show the nuances of the female disability-romance plot and how it differs from the male plot.

In my writing, I will use person-first language when describing disability. Person-first language refers to putting the person before the disability, describing what a person has, not who a person is. Person-first language uses phrases such as "person with a disability" as opposed to phrases that identify a person solely based on their disabled such as "the disabled." Although the language of the novels I look at do not always use person-first language, disability studies have utilized this type of language in order to reconcile past erasure of people with disabilities' identities. Overall, this thesis takes a critical disability theory perspective when engaging with literature that utilizes the disability-romance plot. Therefore, I will look at the way disability intersects with gender, socioeconomic status, and romance in the disability-romance plot to provide a more nuanced perspective of disability and people with disabilities in literature.

Chapter One: The Male Disability-Romance Plot

Disability has historically been a cultural marker of villainy, a trend which is evident in Victorian literature. Often, a physical deformity or mental unsoundness gave a signal to readers that a character was evil: Wackford Squeers from *Nicholas Nickleby* is a cruel, one-eyed schoolmaster; Daniel Quilp, the main antagonist of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), is a vicious dwarf; and Bertha Mason, the supposed madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*, is viewed as violently insane by the main set of characters. Even today, modern culture has a trend of using disability to mark the main villain: Scar from "The Lion King" or Darth Vader from "Star Wars."

However, in this chapter, I turn to a very different use of disability in Victorian fiction. In what I term the "male disability-romance plot," disability is used as a plot device to solve unsolvable conflicts within romantic pairings. The plot follows a set pattern: a male character, the love interest, experiences a tragic event, becomes disabled, and, as a result, becomes a better fit to be a romantic partner. First, two characters who have a romantic attraction are prevented from being together due to differences in social status and/or differences in the level of attraction. The female character is of lower social status than the male, and therefore, a relationship between the two challenges social conventions. The male character's aloofness and arrogance further separate the pair. Then, when the male character is subsequently injured in an accident and becomes disabled, a new romantic dynamic emerges that allows for the couple to unite. Disability helps to allow the transcending of social classes by elevating the woman's status through her role as a caretaker and humbling the man through his dependence on the woman. Therefore, on more equal terms, the couple is able to act on their affection for one another. Thus, disability is used by Victorian authors as a tool to enable romance in an otherwise improbable

pairing. This pattern emerges again and again in Victorian literature, including in bestsellers such as *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë with Jane and Mr. Rochester; *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens with Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam; and *The Heir of Redclyffe* by Charlotte Yonge with Philip and Laurie.

This chapter is split into two sections. The first looks at *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens to show how Eugene and Lizzie are a primary example of the disability-romance plot. I also break down two main features of the male disability-romance plot: the arrogant man and the sickroom scene, using both *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Heir of Redclyffe* as example texts. The second section focuses on *Jane Eyre* and explores how the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester is another clear example of the disability-romance plot. Additionally, this section examines *Olive* by Dinah Maria Craik, a retelling of *Jane Eyre* with a protagonist with a disability, to show how the intersection between disability, femininity, and religiosity complicates the disability-romance plot.

Our Mutual Friend

Our Mutual Friend by Charles Dickens canvasses the spectrum of disability. The novel includes the villain with a disability trope and also uses disability as a way to individualize unusual characters. But *Our Mutual Friend* also nicely outlines the male disability-romance plot with the story of Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam. Although Eugene and Lizzie are from different social classes and are prevented from getting married, Dickens uses Eugene's accident at the end of the novel to bend societal expectations and mend the conflicts that prevent the couple from being together, therefore ending with their happily ever after. In this section, I begin by looking at the traditional portrayals of disability in *Our Mutual Friend,* then move onto the

ways in which Jenny Wren complicates these ideas, and finally, look at how the disability-romance plot is used to allow Eugene and Lizzie's marriage. I will also look at how disability reveals gender norms of nineteenth-century England and how Dickens subverts traditional masculine ideals in favor of creating a male romantic lead who is more feminine and dependent than a stereotypical Victorian man.

The Paradox of Silas Wegg

From its inception, *Our Mutual Friend* seems to portray disability in the typical Victorian novel way, using disability as an indicator of villainy. One of the primary antagonists of the story, Silas Wegg, a ballad-seller turned reading tutor, is constantly described physically and characterized through his disability. When he is initially introduced, Wegg is described as a "knotty man… with a face, carved out of very hard material, that had just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle… Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally" (Dickens 53). Not only is Wegg's physical disability described, but his wooden leg also reflects his hard and rugged personality. By intertwining physicality with characteristics, Dickens highlights how a less-than-normal character is reflected by a deviation from the able-body.

Amputations and other physical disabilities were prevalent in Dickensian London. At the time, industrial accidents and transportation mishaps, as well as the era of "crude surgery and the Napoleonic Wars," meant that wooden legs "were not an uncommon sight in Dickens's lifetime" (Costell 50). Edward Forse reminds us that "it must be remembered how common - and popular! - wooden legs were in early Victorian days" (Forse 427). Consequently, wooden legs, like those of Silas Wegg, were a salient part of society. At the beginning of the story, we learn that Silas

has lost his leg to an unspecified accident that resulted in a hospital amputation, and from that moment on, the reader is continuously reminded of Wegg's disability. He is called "the wooden Wegg," "a literary man with a wooden leg," "a stiff, knotty figure," and someone who "looked like a German wooden toy" (Dickens 56, 57, 484, 484). Dickens makes sure the reader associates Wegg with his wooden leg by even referring to his walking style as "stumping" (Dickens 484). Therefore, Wegg's transformation from a harmless vagrant to an extortionist is thus predictable to the reader because Wegg's character is synonymous with his disability, and his wooden leg is a manifestation of his hard personality. When Wegg is first introduced, he is hired by Mr. Boffin to tutor him in reading. Although Wegg is never portrayed as a morally superior character, his relationship with Mr. Boffin begins lightheartedly when he uses Mr. Boffin's naiveté to finagle food and, eventually, salaried employment. For example, in a comical scene, Wegg tricks Mr. Boffin into giving him some pie "'You read my thoughts, sir. Do my eyes deceive me, or is that object up there a—a pie?' 'It can't be a pie…Have some, Wegg?' 'Thank you, Mr. Boffin, I think I will, at your invitation'" (Dickens 64-65). However, Wegg's trickery takes a darker turn when he begins to blackmail Mr. Boffin after discovering a copy of Harmon's will that disputes the claim that Mr. Boffin should be the inheritor of Harmon's wealth. Wegg's evil character is eventually explicitly highlighted when his accomplice Venus uses a play on words to replace the word villainy with Wegg's name: "I ever viewed myself with anything but reproach for having turned out of the paths of science into the paths of—' he was going to say 'villainy,' but, unwilling to press too hard upon himself, substituted with great emphasis—'Weggery'" (Dickens 565). In sum, Silas Wegg is defined, both physically and morally, by his disability, which marks him from the beginning of the story as a villain.

However, despite Wegg fitting into the disabled-villain archetype, he is never taken seriously as a threat by the characters around him. On the surface, Wegg fills the role of the main villain in *Our Mutual Friend.* But by the end of the novel, Wegg is no more than the comic relief of the story. For example, the reader believes that Wegg poses a threat to Mr. Boffin because he finds a copy of Mr. Harmon's will, which jeopardizes Mr. Boffin's claim to the Harmon Estate. However, it is later revealed that Wegg's plan to use the will was foiled from the very beginning. While Mr. Venus, Wegg's supposed partner in crime, appeared to be faithful to Wegg's plan to blackmail Mr. Boffin, Venus was actually double-crossing Wegg almost the entire time by informing Mr. Boffin about the plan to ruin him. Therefore, any threat that Wegg appeared to have was false, as the characters he was supposed to harm knew they were never in any real danger.

Wegg's disability may mark him as a villain, but it is also the engine of his character's comic effects. Dickens uses Wegg's disability to undermine his intentions to be a threat, as disability in Victorian literature was coded with the idea that a person with a disability was inherently a failure. Disability scholar Clare Walker Gore outlines the way disability works as a deficiency by explaining how:

> Whether by performing the comic turns or pathetic set pieces that engage the reader's interest…the characters who populate novels are working all the time to keep the wheels of the plot grinding – working, in other words, to make the novel work. If the attribution of disabled identity (being 'crippled', 'afflicted', 'deformed') limits characters' ability to perform such work, then we might consider characters as disabled in the dictionary's second sense: 'incapacitated, taken out of service.' To be a disabled character might, in other words, mean being disabled as a character. (Gore 3)

In literature, a disability works like a synonym for inability or incapability. The term is "rooted not in neutrality but in negatively conceived difference" (Gore 2). Therefore, the reader subconsciously knows that Wegg would never be successful in his evil plans because fictional

characters with disabilities are always relegated to be insufficient in Victorian literature. Dickens uses disability to make Wegg the undoing of himself by building off of the preconceived idea that people with disabilities could never succeed. Therefore, disability becomes a magical solution that not only allows Wegg to be the comedic relief but also to easily solve the problems in the book. Simply put, the ending to the very complicated Boffin-Harmon plot of *Our Mutual Friend* is not a result of the hero characters stopping Wegg's blackmail attempts, but rather the reveal that everyone knew the will Wegg found was outdated and that he was never a threat to begin with. Wegg may have been marked as a villain and wanted to cause real harm, but he was never going to succeed because he had a disability.

In addition to the paradox of Silas Wegg being useful for understanding nineteenth-century attitudes towards disability, Wegg also illustrates Victorian male gender conventions. Understanding the interaction between disability and masculinity in Wegg's character is important because it will be helpful for understanding the interaction between disability and masculinity in the disability-romance plot. Wegg's character reveals a trend in Victorian literature where disability works to emasculate a male character and thus has him break from conventional gender norms. Although I will go into the reasons why in the disability-romance plot the emasculation is actually helpful in fostering romance, for Wegg as a villain it hurts his chances of succeeding. For example, despite being depicted as an "unmitigated scoundrel-sly, mercenary, and calculating, without a single redeeming feature," as Goldie Morentaler describes him, Silas Wegg ends up being continuously kicked around by the other characters (94). In fact, at the end of the book, Sloppy literally throws Wegg onto a wagon: "Sloppy, who was now close to Wegg, backed to Wegg's back, stopped, grasped his coat collar behind with both hands, and deftly swung him up like the sack of flour" (Dickens 769). Wegg may be cunning, but his

disability makes him not physically strong and therefore less threatening. He is so weak that he can even be tossed into a barrel. Wegg's failure helps a modern reader understand that for a villain to succeed in a Victorian novel, they need to be strong, tough, and cutthroat: traditionally masculine traits. Wegg's disability works in opposition to these traits and thus contributes to his failure. Overall, Wegg's character is important in understanding that disability and gender do not impact characters in isolated ways but work together to reveal truths about society, whether gender norms or ideas about people with disabilities, that work to shape the dynamics within these novels.

Jenny Wren

Another common trope within Victorian literature is that of a young child who is affected by a disability. In *Our Mutual Friend,* the character Jenny Wren (real name Fanny Cleaver) is a young toy maker with a disability. The first detail the reader learns about Wren is that she has underdeveloped legs and a crooked spine: "A parlor door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something—sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it. 'I can't get up,' said the child, 'because my back's bad, and my legs are queer'" (Dickens 222). However, Wren is also described as "the person of the house" (Dickens 222), despite her disability and youth. Unlike Dickens' use of Silas Wegg, who is slotted neatly into the disabled-villain stereotype, Dickens' portrayal of Jenny Wren is more complex. She is treated sentimentally, but also as a joke; her pain is taken seriously, but also minimized; those who judge her are callous and untrustworthy, and yet the reader is invited to join them; she is a child, but she is not confined to the idea that people with disabilities are necessarily dependent and asexual.

Despite Jenny Wren's disabilities, she subverts the expectation that people with disabilities are inevitably dependent. For instance, although Wren is a young girl, she bosses her father around whenever they are together. This is shown when, after Wren's father greets her, she screams at him: "'How's my Jenny?' said the man, timidly. 'How's my Jenny Wren, best of children, object dearest affections broken-hearted invalid?' To which the person of the house, stretching out her arm in an attitude of command, replied with unresponsive asperity: 'Go along with you! Go along into your corner! Get into your corner directly!'" (Dickens 239). Wren may be smaller and less able-bodied compared to her father, but she is still in the position to exercise her mental superiority over him. Furthermore, although Wren is mocked for her disability, she does not sit idly by and accept her mistreatment. One example of the type of ridicule Wren faces throughout the story is how Charley Hexam judges his sister Lizzie for living with Jenny: "'When are you going to settle yourself in some Christian sort of place, Liz? I thought you were going to do it before now… How came you to get into such company as that little witch's?'" (Dickens 226-227). Although the characters all around Wren view her as deformed, she continuously stands up for herself, exclaiming, "'I know their tricks and their manners!' Shaking the little fist as before. 'And that's not all. Ever so often calling names in through a person's keyhole, and imitating a person's back and legs. Oh! I know their tricks and their manners. And I'll tell you what I'd do, to punish 'em'" (Dickens 224). Through her portrayal as a fiery and determined character, Jenny Wren challenges the notion that people with disabilities must rely on others, taking actions into her own hands to help herself.

Furthermore, Jenny Wren challenges the stereotype that people with disabilities in Victorian literature are often portrayed as asexual. Wren, like the other women in the story, finds herself longing for a husband and even finds herself in a side romantic plot. At the end of the

novel, Sloppy and Jenny Wren are seen flirting, and the readers are left assuming that the pair form a relationship. After making a joke about her husband-to-be, Sloppy "threw back his head and laughed with measureless enjoyment. At the sight of him laughing in that absurd way, the dolls' dressmaker laughed very heartily indeed. So they both laughed, till they were tired" (Dickens 789). In this passage, we assume Sloppy is interested in Jenny Wren romantically. Unlike the traditional portrayal of characters with disabilities that do not get a romance plot, Jenny Wren gets her very own inferred proposal at the end of the story. Wren is characterized as a distinct character from the start because, despite her disability, she wields considerable power over others, particularly her father. Jenny Wren exists somewhere in the middle of a spectrum of disabled to abled bodies due to her personality being drastically different from the typical fictional person with a disability. Therefore, she is able to navigate having a romantic plot due to her ambiguous stance in society: she has agency over her person but is restricted physically. Overall, Jenny Wren's character confronts ideas about disability that are often portrayed in Victorian literature and thought of by Victorian literature scholars.

Magical Disability

A major source of conflict within Victorian novels is how either illnesses or physical altercations result in a character having a disability. The actual event, in addition to how the characters learn to live with the disability, creates tension for the readers. Not only must characters who acquire a disability learn to navigate a world with a new limitation, but they also face a reduction in social standing. In Victorian society, disability marked individuals as dependent or debilitated. Therefore, they are unable to hold the position in society that they had before as an able-bodied person. Interestingly, the act of becoming disabled is also often coupled

with a romantic plot element in Victorian fiction. People with disabilities were traditionally thought to be asexual in literature. Having a disability in fiction almost always meant having no love interest.[5] This is exemplified in *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot, where Philip Wakem, born with a hunchback, is unable to develop a romantic relationship with Maggie. Philip is sheltered from a young age due to his deformity, and he grows into a sensitive, even emasculated, man. Thus, as a result of his disability, Maggie's affection for Philip remains more like that of a friendship or sibling relationship rather than a romantic one.

However, what the viewpoint that people with disabilities are asexual fails to account for is the disability-romance plot. When a character is not born with a disability but rather acquires a disability in the middle of a novel, the typical assumption that people with disabilities are asexual disappears, and instead, a romantic plot is able to come to fruition. This occurs because the male character undergoes a personal transformation as a result of his accident, changing from an arrogant and obnoxious man to a gentler figure with an increased capacity for caring and love. Moreover, the disability serves as a *deus ex machina* that resolves the conflicts between the characters, and the resulting disability becomes a way to overcome societal expectations that prevent a couple from being together.

Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam's relationship in *Our Mutual Friend* serves as a clear example of the male disability-romance plot. After Eugene's debilitating accident, he changes his stance on marriage and realizes he wants to marry Lizzie. Eugene and Lizzie initially feel a romantic attraction towards each other and pine for one another from a distance. However,

[5] A great article that details asexuality in Victorian literature is Eunjung Kim's article *Asexuality in Disability Narratives.* Her main argument explains how "in western contexts, people with disabilities have come to have a unique relationship with asexuality: following the corrective claims launched after their long history of desexualization and the pronounced challenge by disability rights movements against the presumption of asexuality, asexual individuals with a disability are often erased" (Kim 481). For further reading on modern writers confronting the connection between asexuality and disability Alice Wong's anthology *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (2020) goes into depth on topics such as interpersonal relationships.

their drastic class differences prevent them from acting on their feelings and forming a romantic relationship. Yet, when Eugene gets attacked by Bradley Headstone and is subsequently harmed, he not only realizes his love for Lizzie is worth more than his aversion to marriage, but his disability also allows the couple to transcend social boundaries. The emasculation of Eugene due to his newfound dependence, and Lizzie's role as caretaker, reverse the power structure that was previously held throughout the book, thus breaking the social class restrictions that prevented them from being together in the first place. Thus, disability serves as a magical solution to the previously impossible nature of their relationship.

Arrogance

At the start of *Our Mutual Friend,* Eugene's able-body is epitomized through his arrogance. *Our Mutual Friend* has two categories of characters: those who dominate, such as Fascination Fledgeby, and those who passively accept exploitation, such as Mr. Dolls. At the beginning of the story, Eugene falls strongly into the first group, presenting himself as roguish and insolent. One way in which Dickens showcases Eugene's arrogance is through what G.W. Kennedy terms "half-naming." "Half-naming" refers to how Dickens uses nicknames or short phrases to summarize the negative qualities of a character (Kennedy 172). For example, in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens uses similar, uncomplicated names to call Boots, Brewer, and Buffer to reflect their dimwitted and one-dimensional personalities. Eugene also practices half-naming in order to highlight his arrogance. One way he does this is by proclaiming that Bradley Headstone's real name "does not concern me at all," and Eugene constantly addresses him by the mocking title of "schoolmaster" (Dickens 287). Furthermore, Eugene always refers to Riah as "Mr. Aaron" to make fun of his Jewish faith (Dickens 398). Eugene even introduces Jenny's

father to Mortimer as “Mr. Dolls” because “Eugene has no idea what his name was, knowing the little dressmaker's to be assumed, but presented him with easy confidence under the first appellation that his associations suggested” (Dickens 527). Up until his accident, Eugene constantly mocked the minor characters, where each character—Headstone, Riah, and Jenny's father—has a trait that makes them easy to pick on. Using quick quips to make fun of Jenny’s father's intelligence or Riah’s faith contributes to Eugene’s superficiality, which distinguishes his under-examined superiority complex.

By positioning Eugene as the apex cis-male, abled-body, arrogant character, Dickens calls attention to the traditional toxic masculinity present in much of Victorian literature. Eugene’s nonchalant attitude towards his job and his life is palpable to the other characters throughout the story. Even before meeting Eugene for the first time, Charley Hexam depicts Eugene’s walk as having “something in the careless manner of this person, and in a certain lazily arrogant air with which he approached, holding possession of twice as much pavement as another would have claimed, instantly caught the boy’s attention” (Dickens 229). Left with few redeeming qualities, Eugene begins the story bickering with Mortimer about his life as a lawyer, making the audience unsympathetic to him. Helping us think about the rigid dynamic in literature at a time when men were often either hyper-masculine or increasingly feminine, is again Karen Bourrier’s argument. Bourrier highlights a common trend in Victorian fiction where a robust male character assumes the role of a caregiver for a disabled and vulnerable male character (Bourrier 2). Manliness was directly connected to strength and any male character who required aid in any way was deemed less masculine. In this binary, Eugene begins *Our Mutual Friend* as the stereotypical masculine man who is only concerned with himself, enjoys belittling others, and strives to appear nonchalant.

In *Our Mutual Friend,* Eugene is pitted against Bradley Headstone, establishing a strong-man-weak-man dynamic. In a parallel story arc, both men fall in love with Lizzie and they both attempt to flaunt their masculinity. However, what makes these two polar opposites is their characteristic differences in how they express their masculinity. On one hand, Bradley Headstone is "never present to himself and shape[d] himself only in banal images of self-identity" (Ferrell 774). But Eugene on the other hand "provocatively and deliberately flaunts his male beauty," exhibiting more traditional confidence (Fontana 37). Furthermore, Eugene's bottle-tight emotions compared to Headstone's fiery ones paint Headstone more feminine. When Headstone is turned down by Lizzie, he has an uproar of emotions: "'Then,' said he, suddenly changing his tone and turning to her, and bringing his clenched hand down upon the stone with a force that laid the knuckles raw and bleeding; 'then I hope that I may never kill him!'" (Dickens 390). As opposed to Eugene who "though supremely self-conscious, buries himself in enigmas, cynicism, and self-deferral because he knows that he tacitly accepts a system of social arrangements that he actively despises," demonstrating a complete restricting of emotion (Farrell 774). Ultimately the mirrored pairs, through Eugene assuming the strong man and Headstone the weak, is used as a reinforcement of the traditional role Eugene starts with, as an able-bodied, arrogant, masculine man.

Arrogance is not only a crucial element in the disability-romance plot of *Our Mutual Friend* but also a common feature in the pattern. In the disability-romance plot, the male character always begins arrogant and conceited. Another novel that predominantly uses the disability-romance plot is the *Heir of Redclyffe* by Charlotte Yonge. The story follows Guy Morville who is the heir to the Redclyffe estate. Guy's cousin Phillip Morville begins as a hypocritical narcissist who attempts to harm Guy's reputation, as without Guy, he would be the

inheritor of the Redclyffe estate. Although Philip eventually falls ill and realizes the error of his ways when Guy nurses him back to health, Philip initially attempts to tarnish Guy's reputation by spreading a rumor that he was a reckless gambler. Philip explains how "'You have noticed it, I know. You remember, too, how unsatisfactory his reserve about his proceedings in London has been, and how he has persisted in delaying there, in spite of all warnings. The work, no doubt, began there, under the guidance of his uncle; and now the St. Mildred's races and Tom Harewood have continued it'" (Yonge 197). As a result, Mr. Edmonstone, the father of Amy, Guy's beloved, refuses to accept their engagement explaining that "'[Guy] thought I was going to give up my poor little girl to a gambler, did he? but he shall soon see what I think of him,—riches, Redclyffe, title, and all!'" (Yonge 197). In the entire first half of the novel, Philip conspires against Guy, exuding jealousy, anger, and arrogance. Thus, like Eugene Wrayburn, when Philip eventually falls ill, he is able to have a redemption arc and transform into a more moral character through his newfound disability.

Rejection of Marriage and Class Difference

Through the comparison between the two initial chapters of *Our Mutual Friend,* Dickens sets up the restrictive social dynamics that dictate everyday life in Victorian England. The first two chapters of the book introduce two distinct social worlds: a higher and lower class. Bruce Beiderwell summarizes the distinction by explaining how "the novel opens in the dark, primitive, and dangerous world of Gaffer Hexam. The second chapter introduces the unbearably bright, new, and insular world of the Veneerings" (Beiderwell 283). One class is made up of new money, while the other is made up of no money. The book utilizes the class distinction from the very beginning of the story to create tension between the romantic interests of Eugene and

Lizzie, where they are unable to be together due to their difference in social status. In the social structures of Victorian England, Lizzie, who has no status or money to her name, would never be able to marry a lawyer like Eugene. However, Dickens is able to use disability as a method to break down the structures that were normally very strict.

Despite his indifference towards most of his life, Eugene is insistent that he has no intention of getting married. Eugene is from a wealthier family, and his father desires that he marry a woman of high rank to match his status. Even still, Eugene complains to Mortimer that he is simply not cut out for marriage: "'You have studied my character. Could I possibly go down there, labeled 'ELIGIBLE. ON VIEW,' and meet the lady, similarly, labeled? Anything to carry out M. R. F.'s arrangements, I am sure, with the greatest pleasure—except matrimony'" (Dickens 149-150). Eugene may not want to marry in general, but to make matters worse, Lizzie, the daughter of a scammer who scans the Thames to find dead bodies to make his living, is of a low social class, and would never be considered "eligible" according to his Most Respected Father (M.R.F.).

In Victorian England, it would have been uncouth to cross social classes in marriage. Molly Anne Rothenberg helps to clarify the societal expectations restricting Eugene by explaining how "his ambiguous treatment of Lizzie can be traced to his submission to paternal injunction, class ideology, rationalized lust, and some desire to be free of all these" (Rothenberg 720). She goes on to describe how a pressing moral issue that arose in mid-Victorian England was how to "disentangle individual motive from social conditioning" (Rothenberg 720). Gribble suggests that "the character of Eugene Wrayburn represents Dickens' interest in the conflict between individual identity and the social persona required by a repressive Victorian society"

(Gribble 214). Eugene is ultimately trapped by his social class and poor attitude, and Lizzie is confined by her father and her low social rank.

However, despite being insistent that he does not want to get married, Eugene is enamored with Lizzie from the second he meets her. After Lizzie's father dies, Eugene visits Lizzie's house and is immediately captivated by her appearance, "Besides, that lonely girl with the dark hair runs in my head. It was little more than a glimpse we had of her that last time, and yet I almost see her waiting by the fire tonight…He could see the light of the fire shining through the window. Perhaps it drew him on to look in" (Dickens 164). Hypocritically, Eugene may put up an aloof front when, in actuality, he longs for Lizzie through most of the book. And Lizzie reciprocates his feelings. When talking to her friend Bella, she confesses how she "loves [Eugene] so much, and so dearly… I am proud and glad to suffer something for him" (Dickens 519). But regardless of their respective feelings, their social classes stand in the way. Lizzie understands that loving Eugene is only a fantasy and that she has never "dreamed of the possibility of his being anything to [her] on this earth" because it would go against social customs at the time (Dickens 518). Ultimately, the tension rises throughout the book between the couple, who have no way of acting on their feelings without running into social norms or ruining Lizzie's reputation.

The one example of women breaking away from traditional gender norms that prevented Lizzie from accepting Eugene's sexual advances out of fear for her reputation is Jenny Wren. Because Jenny Wren is a woman with a disability, she has more leeway to navigate between societal expectations as her very existence challenges the norms. Helena Michie analyzes how:

> Jenny, of course, has her own sexual desires, which, unlike Lizzie, she is able to articulate. Dickens can allow Jenny fantasies of an erotic future precisely because she is crippled, precisely because she does not function traditionally as a heroine. Fantasy and deformity open up a space for the erotic, as does Jenny's

> (chronological) youth. By making Jenny a child and a cripple, Dickens outlines a safe space for the articulation of female sexuality; Jenny can pepper her conversations with fantasies about the 'he' who will come to court her, while Lizzie must deny Eugene's erotic interest. (Michie 212)

Like the disability-romance plot that utilizes disability as a narrative tool to break away from societal expectations, Jenny Wren, being a young woman with a disability, is able to avoid any societal backlash due to her sexual desires because she already exists in society's shadow.

In the lead-up to Eugene's accident, he meets up with Lizzie to discuss how they should proceed with their relationship. Although the couple has a clear affection for one another, Eugene is torn between whether he should marry Lizzie despite her lower class or if he just wants to have sex with her: "'You wouldn't marry for some money and some station, because you were frightfully likely to become bored. Are you less frightfully likely to become bored, marrying for no money and no station? Are you sure of yourself?'" (Dickens 679). He goes back and forth between wanting to marry Lizzie and blaming her social status as a "working girl" (Dickens 676) until he eventually decides that "[he has for Lizzie] a real sentiment of remorseful tenderness and pity. [But] It was not strong enough to impel him to sacrifice himself and spare her, but it was a strong emotion" (Dickens 675). Therefore, Eugene and Lizzie choose to separate from one another.

Deathbed to Transformation

Our Mutual Friend's disability-romance plot culminates with Eugene being attacked, subsequently disabled, and emerging with a newfound attitude in life. After leaving the meeting with Lizzie, Eugene is violently attacked and, as a result, acquires a disability. The attack causes his "arms [to be] broken" and he becomes "paralyzed" (Dickens 682). Through acquiring a disability, Eugene's character changes to the point where he cares less about his status and more

about his own emotions. Sitting in the hospital bed, Eugene changes his mind from before his accident and explains (through mute signs only intelligible to another character with a disability) that he has the wish to marry Lizzie: "'Your mind will be more at peace, lying here, if you make Lizzie your wife. You wish me to speak to her, and tell her so, and entreat her to be your wife'... 'Yes God bless you! Yes'" (Dickens 722). Before, Eugene was unable to think of Lizzie as anything more than a potential sexual partner. However, now that his disability has demoted his status, he is allowed to cross social classes to be with Lizzie.

A common trope in literature is the idea that in order to figure out what one truly wants, they have to hit rock bottom. It is only when one is at their lowest that one can really understand what is important to them. Eugene has this realization himself after his accident and takes on a new perspective on life, regretting his "trifled wasted youth" (Dickens 735). Ernest Fontana builds on this idea by pointing out how becoming dependent on others as a result of a disability leads to increased vulnerability, which further aids in the transformation of character. Fontana provides two reasons for Eugene's change of heart: "1. His wounds signify both the rage his manly 'plumage' inspires in his competitors and a vulnerability that invites the sickroom care of Jenny Wren and then Lizzie herself," and "2. It is this vulnerability that transforms Eugene, in the eyes of Lizzie, from seducer to potential husband" (Fontana 104). While Eugene's arrogance and social status pushed Lizzie away, the physical harm his accident caused to his body forced any facade he may have had to fall apart. By becoming disabled, Eugene is able to cross between socioeconomic strata in his picking of a wife because he is no longer seen as the same male figure as before his accident. His paralysis humbles him both physically and socially; now it is more acceptable for him to enter into a marriage with Lizzie.

On the other hand, Lizzie's social status is elevated because she can now be a caretaker for Eugene. Her role as a partner is more easily justified because she is necessary for his survival. Fontana adds to this argument by describing how "Lizzie as his rescuer and nurse assumes an equality with the wounded Wrayburn who becomes for a time powerless and dependent. For Lizzie, it is this very dependency that, paradoxically, affirms Wrayburn's seductive, but redirected sexual and procreative power" (Fontana 41). The entire story up until the sickbed scene reinforces the social norm that Lizzie could never be with Eugene due to their varying classes. However, as a caretaker, Lizzie is given the agency and responsibility to keep Eugene alive. In this sense, disability is not a limiting agent but actually changes the conventional notion of relationships to allow Lizzie, a woman of a lower class, to support Eugene, a man of the upper class. Thus, now on equal footing, Eugene is able to propose to Lizzie and have a romantic relationship.

Eugene entered this story as the epitome of the hypermasculine fictional male. However, in his transformation on his sickbed, disability serves as a literary tool to disrupt and even reverse the gender binary. In a world that was so hostile to women, the domestic sphere was one of the few places where they could assert themselves. This means that for "Victorian leisure class women, illness could serve as a means of control over body and family, as time and space where conjugal and familial duties were suspected and the body, usually inaccessible to the language of society, could be articulated in and through the discourse of medicine" (Michie 199). Lizzie is able to find agency through taking care of Eugene. Before, Eugene held all the power in the relationship as a male of higher status. However, now Lizzie is physically stronger than Eugene and is in charge of his well-being. The gender-role reversal is evident when Eugene establishes his debt to Lizzie, saying how "'How shall I ever pay all I owe you, if I recover!' where Lizzie

responds, 'Don't be ashamed of me,' she replied, 'and you will have more than paid all'" (Dickens 734-735). Lizzie is now in charge of directing their relationship as Eugene is physically unable to make objections. However, both Eugene and Lizzie appear to be ashamed of their new dynamic, Eugene of his disability and Lizzie of her class status, and as a result, feel the need to repay one another. After all, their discussion on how to repay one another feels more like a monetary transaction, with words like "pay" or "paid," rather than two people newly in love. Although their role reversal may have allowed for Eugene and Lizzie to exist as a couple, it is still uncomfortable for the both of them.

The novel suggests that upper-class men can only really be transformed by a physical and nearly fatal trauma, resulting, in fact, from an attack by another man. But at the same time, disability seems to empower women as it takes agency away from men. The *deus ex machina* quality of the disability-romance plot is reminiscent of many of Dickens' stories, where "his narratives make leaps, and when characters change, they often do so through abrupt conversation" or, in this case, an abrupt accident (Levine 142). One critic of Dickens' magical solution, Jennifer Gribble, notes how "the seemingly 'change of heart' theme of many of the characters within the plot adds to the weakness of the story…Dickens cannot embody in Lizzie Hexam a sufficiently convincing source of Eugene Wrayburn's change of heart" (Gribble 214). There is no logical way to move from the impossibility of Eugene and Lizzie's relationship at the beginning of the story to their marriage at the end without acknowledging the movement away from the realistic problem that kept them apart in the first place. Dickens replaces the logic that would allow characters to break from the restrictive society by using disability as a catch-all. Even if one ignores the quick solution disability offers Dickens' text, it is also apparent how he relies on problematic stereotypes of disability and gender. Lizzie is only able to take care of

Eugene because he is marked as incapable of taking care of himself. Furthermore, it is only Eugene's emasculation that allows Lizzie to step in as caretaker. Therefore, where the male disability-romance plot may seem progressive by including an inter-abled relationship, Dickens' reliance on gender and ability stereotypes only allows us to applaud his progressivism so far.

And despite the criticism Dickens' ending has received, the sickroom resolution moment is not unique to *Our Mutual Friend.* In *The Heir of Redclyffe,* Yonge similarly uses the sickroom deathbed setting to resolve the tense character relationships from earlier in the story. After traveling, Philip finds himself with a deathly fever that debilitates him. Yonge describes how "[Philip] is in a stupor; it is not sleep. He is frightfully ill, I never felt anything like the heat of his skin" (Yonge 396). Luckily, Philp's cousin Guy comes to his care, despite the animosity Philip exhibited toward Guy throughout the book. Guy waits on Philip's every need and he begins to realize the error of his ways. Having "judged [Guy too] harshly," Philip begins to feel regret for interfering with Guy's reputation and confesses this realization to Guy himself. Philip admits that:

> He was relieved by having confessed, though to the person whom, a few weeks back, he would have thought the last to whom he could have made such a communication, over whom he had striven to assume superiority, and therefore before whom he could have least borne to humble himself—nay, whose own love he had lately traversed with an arrogance that was rendered positively absurd by this conduct of his own. (Yonge 408)

Through his illness, Philip transforms from an angry and insecure man to a man willing to apologize for his actions. Making matters worse for Philip, Guy contracts the disease and ends up dying as a result. The shame Philip feels for his actions and the fate of Guy helps make his character friendlier and overall more positive. Karen Bourrier writes on the relationship between the sickroom and relationships explaining how "the illnesses of Guy and Philip allow for the integration and reconciliation of wayward family members" (Bourrier 34). Miriam Bailin adds

onto this idea explaining that the "Victorian sickroom bears special significance as a place of respite from pettiness, where conflicts between and within characters can heal alongside the body" (Bailin 121). Furthermore, before Philip's love interest broke off the engagement because of his treatment of Guy, however after his illness, Laura and Philip come together due to Philip's newfound regret and apologies. Overall, the sickroom humbles Eugene and Philip, changing them from arrogant to caring. It is their respective accidents and disabilities that allow the men to reflect on their errors and change for the better.

Jane Eyre

Similar to Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend,* Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents many avenues for looking at disability. Talia Schaffer explains how "*Jane Eyre* is a novel in which a truly remarkable number of characters experience disabling conditions: chronic illness, debilitating trauma, mental disability, nervous impairments, and blindness" (Schaffer 265). In this section, I will show how the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester demonstrates the disability-romance plot by analyzing the relationship between caretaker and partner, as well as looking at how Bertha Mason's portrayal of mental disability differs from Mr. Rochester's physical disability. I will also look at the novel *Olive* by Dinah Craik, a *Jane Eyre* retelling in which the protagonist is born with a shoulder deformity. Altogether, this section continues revealing the pattern of the male disability-romance plot as a way for authors to bypass societal norms within relationships and expand the ideas of romance within atypical pairs of characters.

Disability Breaking Down Class Difference

Mr. Rochester's accident at the end of *Jane Eyre* is an example of how a disability can provide a miraculous solution to relationship conflict within a novel. At the climax of the story, Jane flees Thornfield Hall, leaving her fiancé, Mr. Rochester, after discovering that he was hiding his first wife, Bertha Mason, in his attic. With wealth inequality, an age difference, and questions about Mr. Rochester's character, it seems that nothing will allow Jane to have a happy ending. However, at the end of the novel, Mr. Rochester gets into a serious accident after his wife escapes her captivity and burns down his house. As a result, Mr. Rochester becomes "stone-blind" and loses one hand (Brontë 417). Despite the tragic accident that left him in need of care and caused him to lose his property, Mr. Rochester's new disability reconstructs his character to increase his compatibility with Jane, eventually leading to their reunification. Jane exclaims how "Do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity? - if you do, you little know me. A soft hope blent with my sorrow that soon I should dare to drop a kiss on that brow of rock, and on those lips so sternly sealed beneath it" (Brontë 419-420). Jane is not intimidated by Mr. Rochester's new disability and appearance; instead, she welcomes his newfound change in character. As a result of his changed state and the absence of his wife, Jane gains renewed hope that they will be able to be together again.

While disability is often used to make a character appear less desirable, Brontë romanticizes Mr. Rochester's injuries as a way to explain Jane's growing desire to come back to Mr. Rochester. Mr. Rochester's disability is used as a way to reveal his true character and allow Jane to be reassured of their pairing. One of the main problems that prohibited Jane and Mr. Rochester's marriage was due to his lying to Jane about his first marriage. Due to Mr. Rochester's marriage to Bertha Mason, he was ineligible to marry Jane as Bertha was still alive.

This would have forced Jane to be his mistress, regardless of the nature of their feelings for one another. Rejecting a relationship under these terms, Jane runs away. However, after Mr. Rochester becomes disabled, Jane has a realization and comes to terms with Mr. Rochester's character, explaining how:

> I should not have left him thus, he said, without any means of making my way... I should have confided in him: he would never have forced me to be his mistress. Violent as he had seemed in his despair, he, in truth, loved me far too well and too tenderly to constitute himself my tyrant: he would have given me half his fortune, without demanding so much as a kiss in return. (Brontë 428)

Jane is convinced of Mr. Rochester's devotion because he is put in a more vulnerable position after his accident, which allows him to have more time to communicate and reveal his true intentions to Jane. For example, when the couple first reunites after the fire, he explains how "'It is a dream; such dreams as I have had at night when I have clasped her once more to my heart; as I do now; and kissed her, as thus- and felt that she loved me, and trusted that she would not leave me'" (Brontë 422). Immediately, Mr. Rochester is open about his feelings for Jane and his love for her. Overall, his increased vulnerability physically translates into Mr. Rochester being more vulnerable emotionally with Jane, allowing the couple to form a romantic relationship.

Apart from the hindrance caused by Bertha Mason, which prevented Jane and Mr. Rochester from getting married, the couple's union would have been considered unconventional in the nineteenth century due to their class and wealth difference. Mr. Rochester, heir to his father's fortune, was of the upper class. Jane, on the other hand, grew up an orphan with no money to her name and worked as a governess. Although not as socially taboo as the marriage between Eugene and Lizzie in *Our Mutual Friend,* Jane and Mr. Rochester's relationship would have been looked down upon by those around them. In fact, when Mrs. Fairfax finds out about Jane and Mr. Rochester's engagement she is uncomfortable with the pairing: "'It passes me!' she

continued; ‘but no doubt it is true since you say so. How it will answer, I cannot tell: I really don’t know. Equality of position and fortune is often advisable in such cases; and there are twenty years of difference in your ages. He might almost be your father’” (Brontë 257). Yet, Brontë utilizes the disability-romance plot where Jane and Mr. Rochester are able to cross the rigid social class boundaries that prevented their marriage initially because of his new disability. Despite their vastly different social statuses when they meet in the novel, Mr. Rochester’s disability helps to equalize the two characters, not only in ability but also financially. Nancy Strahan explains how “Mr. Rochester’s movement from abled to disabled is also presented as a downgrade in economic status” (Strahan 25). When Jane first meets Mr. Rochester, he is depicted as successful and wealthy. Mr. Rochester goes so far as to explain to Jane his family history and how he acquired his wealth: “My brother in the interval was dead; and at the end of the four years my father died too” (Brontë 298). With no other older brothers, it would leave his father's wealth to him. Furthermore, Mr. Rochester was portrayed as highly regarded by society, as during Jane’s time at Thornfield Hall, Mr. Rochester hosted numerous guests, “Indeed, he is - in three days… and not alone either. I don’t know how many of the fine people at the Leas are coming with him. He sends directions for all the best bedrooms to be prepared; and the library and the drawing-rooms are to be cleaned out” (Brontë 159). Therefore, from the very moment Jane and Mr. Rochester meet until she flees from Thornfield Hall, Mr. Rochester is positioned above Jane in status.

However, when Mr. Rochester becomes disabled, he loses not only his status as an able-bodied man with power but also his wealth. Strahan explains how, at the end of the book, although Rochester is described as having lost his money and is now poor, nothing about his accident would suggest that he should lose his financial status:

> While the fire is an acceptable reason for the loss of Thornfield, it does not justify his fall from society, his loss of staff, and his apparent loss of wealth. 'Who is with him?' 'Old John and his wife: he would have none else. He is quite broken down, they say' (382). These markers of brokenness, emotional, financial, and physical, are tied explicitly to his disability. Even when Jane has expressed her desire to marry him, he brings up his change in status: 'A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand?' (396). (Strahan 25)

Mr. Rochester's disability becomes symbolic when his loss of ability translates into his loss of wealth. Brontë uses Mr. Rochester's poverty at the end of the novel in order to showcase his change in social status. Although it is improbable that he would lose all his wealth in the house fire, his disability is used as an easy explanation as to why he is no longer the strong man he once was. Thus, with Mr. Rochester's reduced economic status, he becomes a more suitable partner for Jane, as their financial standing is now more comparable. It also helps that Jane, at the end of the novel, acquires her own form of inheritance, aiding in making the couple more financially compatible to get married under Victorian standards. Overall, through the combination of Jane's movement from poor to wealthy and Mr. Rochester's move from abled to disabled, the couple is able to bend the social stigmas preventing them from being together.

True Love: Tension Between Lover and Caretaker

While Mr. Rochester's accident may have created the circumstances that allowed him and Jane to be together, the disability-romance plot introduces a tension that complicates their relationship by promoting questions about whether their love is based on genuine attraction or if Jane only serves as a caretaker. Mr. Rochester's disability has a significant impact on Jane's role in their relationship, as she takes on a new responsibility of caring for him. Jane offers to be his "nurse [and] housekeeper," where she will "wait on him" (Brontë 423). Thus, Jane's role as a partner is linked from the start with her role as a helper. Brontë couples these two roles together

and emphasizes Jane's sacrifice in becoming Mr. Rochester's aid: "'Yes—but you understand one thing by staying with me … to wait on me as a kind little nurse (for you have an affectionate heart and a generous spirit, which prompts you to make sacrifices for those you pity)'" (Brontë 424). On one hand, this appears to be a testament to Jane's love for Mr. Rochester, as she is willing to go above and beyond to help Mr. Rochester transition to a life with a disability. On the other hand, the caretaker role creates a codependent relationship that assumes that Mr. Rochester is helpless and incapable of living on his own. Jane explains, "No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am...I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye" (Brontë 438). Jane's notion that their relationship is elevated because of her role as Mr. Rochester's helper romanticizes disability and takes away from their innate soulmate compatibility. Andries Hiskes notes how "the forms of companionship Jane proposes to Rochester relate to a series of actions (reading, walking, sitting, waiting, and being hands and eyes to him), that have a complex relationship with Rochester's disability" (Hiskes 1943). Waiting on Mr. Rochester implies a relationship of servitude and caretaker rather than a lover. The problem is that unlike able-bodied characters, who are written to be complex and nuanced, characters with disabilities are portrayed as only having one significant defining trait: their disability. While Mr. Rochester continues to have his charm and wit after his accident, he nonetheless remains dependent on Jane at the end of the novel, thereby diminishing his character from a strong independent man to a person who is reliant on Jane for all his needs. Instead of portraying characters with disabilities as complex people who are capable of romantic plots that are not codependent, Victorian novels portray people with disabilities as "childlike, dependent, and in need of charity or pity" (Shapiro 10). Together, Mr. Rochester's lack of independence and the way his disability appears to be used only as a plot device to easily solve the circumstances in

the novel that were preventing the main romantic storyline creates a strong argument that their marriage is that of caretaking rather than love.

However, a more compelling reading of Jane and Mr. Rochester's relationship highlights their real love and affection for one another, expanding past Jane's role as a caretaker. Davel Bolt et al. make a distinction between the care Jane provides Mr. Rochester and the care provided by a nurse or helper, arguing that "Brontë's narrative thematizes the transition from one caregiving paradigm to another, from custodial care to caring labor" (Bolt 92). Torrell specifically focuses on Jane's transition from being simply a nurse figure to Mr. Rochester to that of a loving partner. For example, the first time they meet, Mr. Rochester falls from his horse and must rely on Jane's help. She is primarily concerned with his health and less so with his overall well-being. However, after his accident leaves him blind, her love for him "accomplishes a rewriting of conventional notions of disabled masculinity. Under Jane's pen, he is not asexual, an object of disgust, a person to be shunned, but is instead someone who stokes her desire and allows her an outlet to experience it" (Torrell 87). Jane aids Mr. Rochester as if she were a nurse but goes beyond that to still view him as an individual worthy of love and therefore exhibiting caring labor. Thus, Jane's narration asserts Rochester's masculinity and sexual desirability alongside his disability. This is seen when Jane and Mr. Rochester are talking at the end of the novel; their language implies and body movements imply their attraction for one another: "'He sees nothing attractive in me; not even youth—only a few useful mental points.—Then I must leave you, sir, to go to him?' I shuddered involuntarily, and clung instinctively closer to my blind but beloved master. He smiled" (Brontë 432). Mr. Rochester continues: "'Sacrifice! What do I sacrifice? Famine for food, expectation for content. To be privileged to put my arms round what I value—to press my lips to what I love—to repose on what I trust: is that to make a sacrifice? If

so, then certainly I delight in sacrifice'" (Brontë 433). Despite Mr. Rochester's insistent questioning about his appearance or his love for him, she never wavers and continuously reinforces her attraction for him. Rochester's disability at the end of *Jane Eyre*:

> Guarantees Jane's domestic position as nurse… [but she claims that] 'there [is] a pleasure in [her] services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad—because he claim[s] those services without painful shame or damping humiliation,' and 'he [feels] [she] loves him so fondly that to yield that attendance [is] to indulge [her] sweetest wishes.' (Joyal 13)

Furthermore, according to Talia Schaffer, "*Jane Eyre* puts loving caregiving against indifferent paid service" (Schaffer 437). Jane does not serve Mr. Rochester for any monetary gain or personal reason other than her care for him and her love for him. So, while Jane's care may appear to be only that of a caregiver, her continual romantic attraction for him mixed with her pleasure in providing for him shows a deep love for the couple that expands past simple caretaking.

Bertha Mason

In the novel, there are two main arcs that depict disability: Bertha Mason's mental disability and Mr. Rochester's physical disability. Although Bertha and Mr. Rochester's characters parallel one another in many ways, they are treated vastly differently. At the time *Jane Eyre* was published, mental health and medical care were rapidly evolving. Heralded as a feminist text in many ways, Brontë has been thought of as being a forefront figure in the changing world. However, what has long complicated the novel's reputation is the treatment of Bertha Mason, who is demonized and locked up in his attic with poor care. Contemporary readers can attribute the treatment of her character in part to the racist ideologies of the time, given the fact that she is described as "creole" and assumed to be of a darker complexion. In the

novel, her treatment is justified based on the idea that Mason is mentally unstable and should thus be locked away. This is in direct opposition to the portrayal of Mr. Rochester's disability, where his loss of sight and hand evokes sympathy from the readers. Bertha's disability is introduced as consisting of being bad-tempered, "intemperate," and "unchaste" (Brontë 298). Whether Bertha was originally sane or not, after years of imprisonment, her mental state significantly deteriorated. By the time Jane meets her, Bertha has been given animalistic characteristics; she cannot speak rationally and is portrayed as menacing. However, when Mr. Rochester is revealed to have lost his sight and hands, he is carefully waited on by Jane and his staff. Instead of seeing him as inhumane, the reader sympathizes with Mr. Rochester. What makes these characters' disabilities different is the interplay between race, gender, and ability.

To start, while Bertha is initially seen as having an outrageous character and being dangerous, she is really just a product of her treatment. Schaffer explains how "Although [Bertha] is depicted as animalistic, the signs of her dehumanization—her unkempt hair, her plain straight gown, her discolored face—are signs of her neglect" (Schaffer 266). Bertha, by existing in racist Victorian England, would have been thought of as inherently savage and a violator of traditional ideas of femininity or womanhood. Therefore, "a Victorian audience would not question Bertha's punishment for 'depraved' behavior and would be willing to offer Rochester some sympathy for his desire to commit bigamy. By disrupting the virtues of true womanhood, Bertha loses all claims to femininity and sympathy" (Joyal 16). The narrative depicts Bertha's cognitive disability as a moral failing for which she deserves to be considered insane. In contrast, Rochester's disabilities do not dehumanize him but rather humanize him. His disability serves as a means for him to fail to learn a lesson, and the readers will feel sorry for him as he loses his wealth and health. The difference ultimately comes down to the societal structures that determine

who is worthy of sympathy and who is not. According to Christopher Gabbard, "Bertha is essentially subhuman, terrifying, and disgusting," and viewing her prompts Jane to see "something more deserving of annihilation than of charity" (Gabbard 102). All the while, Mr. Rochester is seen as strong and deserving of the life he was born into.

Interestingly, while many scholars see Bertha's disability as an example of Brontë's problematic racial perspective, others argue that it was actually a commentary on the treatment of mental illness. Gabbard argues that Brontë was criticizing Mr. Rochester's care of Bertha rather than endorsing it. He explains how:

> Situating the novel historically helps one to understand why Rochester's attitude about mental disability and caregiving may not be shared or endorsed by the novel's implied author. Jane tells her story in the middle of the 1840s, an historical moment when the neglect and ill treatment of 'lunatics' and 'idiots' caught the public's attention, and a number of liberal reforms were enacted with regard to improving their conditions. (Gabbard 100)

Sally Shuttleworth builds off this idea, outlining how "the system at Thornfield represents the vestiges of a prior era, when the 'animal' insane were kept hidden and mechanically restrained (as Bertha is after each attack) and no attempt was made at cure or recuperation" (Shuttleworth 160). Despite modern criticism of these institutions, by the 1840s, the public began to believe that housing people with mental illnesses in private homes was backward and that accommodations in asylums were progressive, therapeutic, and humane. Therefore, Mr. Rochester's treatment of Bertha was supposed to be viewed as negligent, abusive, and cruel. Bertha Mason, in the end, provides complicated implications about disability and how it interacted with her race and gender in comparison to Mr. Rochester as a man. Whether or not it was deemed a commentary or the implicit racist and ableist assumptions of the time seeped into her work, the difference in treatment of Rochester and Bertha's disability ultimately comes down

to it being more socially acceptable to provide less care for a woman of color with a disability than a white man with a disability.

Olive

Although disability is a salient part of *Jane Eyre,* Jane herself is not a character marked with a disability. However, Dinah Craik reimagines the story in her novel *Olive* by writing a protagonist, based on Jane, who has a disability. The novel begins when Olive is born, where the doctor quickly points out Olive's shoulder deformity: "'I am sorry to say that the child is *deformed*—slightly so—very slightly I hope—but most certainly deformed. Hump-backed'" (Craik 8). Unlike *Jane Eyre* or *Our Mutual Friend*, which use the disability-romance plot to allow the main romantic couple to be together, Olive faces opposition from society from the beginning of the novel, deeming her ugly and unsuitable for marriage. For instance, after being rejected by her beautiful mother, Olive is raised by Elspie, her nurse. Her father pities her from the moment they meet: "he shook her off angrily, looked once more at the child, and then turned away, putting his hand before his eyes, as if to shut out the sight. Olive saw the gesture. Young as she was, it went deep to her child's soul" (Craik 29). And at a ball, her best friend explains how "to think of Olive stealing any girl's lover! She, who will probably never have one in her entire life" (Craik 79). Olive is repeatedly rejected by those around her due to her appearance. As a result, Olive turns towards the arts and her religion to find fulfillment in life, writing off romance for her future. Yet despite her constant rejection, Olive is always positive and cheerful.

Olive's disability may initially prevent her from finding a romantic relationship, but it is actually her disability that allows her to develop the characteristics of a pure domestic wife that inevitably allows Olive to be eligible for marriage. Olive's disability and her cheerful attitude,

mixed with her religious attainment, mark her as pure. Olive is a sympathetic character due to her ability to live life despite her disability without becoming upset. Therefore, although it was extremely rare during the Victorian era to depict characters with disabilities as having the potential to get married, the novel ends with Olive's marriage to Harold Gwynne, with whom she develops a happy relationship. From the beginning, Olive is marked by her naivete. Amanda Joyal explains how when her friend tells her she will never be eligible for marriage:

> Such a betrayal by the people who are supposed to love her the most makes the reader sympathize with Olive... Olive, not understanding, asks Sara why she does not think anyone will ever love her. Sara puts Olive in front of a mirror and points out her disfigurement as the reason she is unlikely to have a lover. Olive 'see[s], as [she] never saw before—so little [she] thought of [her]self' and agrees that 'it is quite true—quite true' (Craik 67). Despite a consistent pattern of rejection from the time she is a child, Olive is naïve enough to not recognize her own disfigurement and difference. This points to her purity; she is continually exposed to evil and negativity and yet, she does not absorb any of it. (Joyal 19-20)

But despite her best friend's comments, Olive continues to have a sweet disposition and be kind. Furthermore, Olive's devotion to God is a direct reflection of her poor treatment as a result of her disability. Clare Walker Gore explains how "Olive's experience of parental rejection, and her need to teach herself what her parents neglect to teach her, are shown to foster her religious life" (Gore 124). Olive is portrayed as having superior religiosity to those around her and this continues until she meets Harold, a faithless clergyman and her eventual husband. Due to Olive's devotion to her religion, she helps Harold obtain his Christian faith. In this way, "she fulfills the role of the true woman; she uses her piety to save man from himself" (Joyal 23). Kristen Starkowski explains how "Olive contentedly goes about her little household duties," creating a comfortable environment for both of them (Starkowski 469). She also offers Harold spiritual guidance and, when she notices that he "look[s] tired and dull," she laughs with him "to send the cobwebs out of his brain" (Starkowski 469). It is because of her disability that allows her to

develop a deep faith, ultimately allowing her physical deformity to be acceptable because she embodies the perfect religious woman Victorian society wanted.

In spite of Olive's disability, Craik portrays Olive as embodying the idea of "a true woman" according to Victorian norms. Being a woman was directly tied to the domestic space and Olive's disability did not prevent her from taking on a domestic role. Even before her marriage, at the start of the novel, Olive was a nurse for her ailing mother: "This night—and not for the first time either—the little maiden of fifteen might have been seen, acting with the energy and self-possession of a woman—soothing her mother's hysterical sufferings—smoothing her pillow, and finally watching by her until she fell asleep" (Craik 61-62). As she gets older, Olive continues to grow into a caring person, and Clare Walker Gore explains that it is because, rather than prevented by, her disability. Gore explains how:

> Olive's piety and 'the religion of a woman's heart' is ultimately shown to be a false one, for the experiences that have led Olive to this lonely place are distinctively feminine, and the religious life she achieves as a result is shown to be uniquely capable of resolving masculine doubts and thereby bringing about the domestic bliss Olive desires. Believing herself cut off from the possibility of marriage, Olive in fact develops the very qualities that fit her to be a wife. (Gore 126)

Therefore, *Olive* differentiates itself from the tropes in Victorian fiction that put forward the idea that people with disabilities were asexual or unfit for marriage, and Craik instead uses disability as a way to develop Olive's character to be the ideal wife.

Olive as a perfect embodiment of a wife stands in contrast to Jane in *Jane Eyre.* Where Olive is passive Jane is ambitious. Cora Kaplan points out how "in her gentleness, resignation, and docility Olive is the antithesis of the rebellious Jane" (Kaplan x.) Their differences in ability translate into their differences in character. For example, Clare Walker Gore explains that Olive was able to pursue her art career and develop an independent life because she had a disability

and that “Olive’s disability actually allows her to remain a woman whilst being granted more opportunities and greater power than her gendered position would usually allow: it is Olive’s disability that enables Craik to reconcile femininity with experience, independence and maturity” (Gore 123). Traditionally in Victorian literature, female characters of higher class would have been discouraged from starting their own career as marriage was supposed to be their future. However, Craik used Olive’s disability to allow this to be permissible. Jane on the other hand is fiery and pushes back against her cousins and her mistreatment throughout the entire story. She does not exhibit the traditional feminine traits until she becomes a governess at the end of the novel, and even then, she is not docile. Olive “embodies a femininity that is completely distinct from *Jane Eyre’s* rebellious demand for justice, its power deriving from its inexhaustible patience and stoicism, based not on a sense of self-worth, but on religious faith” (Gore 126). Jane and Olive grow up and eventually get married in both stories, but the difference is that Olive’s disability is what allows her to gain the characteristics of a perfect woman while Jane needs Mr. Rochester’s disability in order to find her way to marriage.

Interestingly, in the novel, Olive and Harold’s relationship is reciprocal in its feelings and levels. Where Olive provides him guidance on his faith and domestic sphere, Herald provides “Olive psychological support by making her feel comfortable with her disability. When Olive expresses concern that her misshapen form makes her unworthy of Harold… Harold replies ‘to me you are all beautiful … in form and soul’” (Starkowski 469). Harold lists out the ways he considers Olive “all beautiful,” including those of traditional beauty such as “soft smiling mouth” and “long gold curls” (Craik 378). Olive's ability to embody the perfect woman allows Harold to look past her disability. However, Elaine Showalter points out, the inconsistencies in Craik’s representation of Olive’s body throughout the text lead Craik into self-contradiction,

repeatedly claiming Olive's physical difference as slight enough to be concealed by her hair or by a shawl, and yet significant enough to lead everyone to notice it as soon as she appears in public. The erasure of Olive's disability at the end in favor of seeing her as a perfect woman provides an easy way for the couple to end up together.

Conclusion: What the Male Disability-Romance Plot Teach Us About Gender

The male disability-romance plot in novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Our Mutual Friend* challenges societal norms surrounding disability and romance in the nineteenth century. Through characters like Mr. Rochester and Eugene Wrayburn, Brontë and Dickens are able to explore the complexities of disability in romantic relationships and subvert the traditional power dynamics between able-bodied and disabled partners, ultimately portraying a new kind of ideal male romantic lead. No longer are the hyper-masculinized men finding success in relationships across these novels; it is actually the dependent and more feminine men that find love. In fact, the stereotypical male character is actively discouraged from this type of relationship; in the disability-romance plot, arrogant male characters need to change completely before they are suitable to be in a relationship. *Jane Eyre* and *Our Mutual Friend* emphasize a turn to the domestic for men, where men succeed best in relationships when they are cared for by women. Ultimately, the male disability-romance plot reveals a shift towards domesticity and emotional vulnerability in male characters that portrays a new ideal man in Victorian society, one that is humble and dependent, rather than hyper-masculine and independent.

Chapter Two: The Female Disability-Romance Plot

In the previous chapter, the disability-romance plot mainly encompasses male physical disability: Mr. Rochester's blindness and loss of hand, Eugene's paralysis, and Philip's feverous illness. However, the disability-romance plot changes when the woman, rather than the male becomes disabled. In this chapter, I will switch to looking at the "female disability-romance plot." Unlike the male disability-romance plot which follows a standardized form, the pattern in the female disability-romance plot is more varied. Instead of every female character having the same development arc and similar relationship stressors, the disability-romance plot is more tailored to each unique relationship. While the basic outline of the female romance plot is similar to the male plot, in that the female character is humbled by a disability and becomes a better romantic partner, the relationships themselves are more multifaceted.

In the female disability-romance plot, the couple at the start of the novel still begins apart due to a conflict in their respective story, but this is not due to a common socioeconomic or personality issue; rather it is unique to each female narrative. In actuality, the female character's experiences with disabilities differ from that of the male characters' disability plot and even from each other. For example, while many women experience sickness or physical disability like the male characters, the prevalence of mental disability is also seen throughout female disability-romance texts, unlike in the male texts. The complexity of the female disability-romance plot is a result of the intersectionality between gender and disability. In both disability-romance plots, characters become better fit for their romantic partners through the act of becoming disabled. However, for women, Victorian authors had a more variable idea about what that ideal feminine character should look like as opposed to for men where the male leads have similar character traits and flaws. Therefore, what stands out about the female disability-romance plot is that a

woman gets into an accident or in another way befalls a disability where she is then made into the specific ideal mate for her potential romantic partner. This appears differently in every book where a woman's compatibility with her male romantic interest is tailored to what the author believes would be the ideal woman.

I will begin this chapter by looking at *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, where I focus on the two romantic plots of the story and how disability plays a unique role in both of them. I then turn to *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, where I focus on the challenges of disabilities and how Collins uses the female disability-romance plot as a way to warn against the consequences of marriage. Finally, I end the chapter with *The Clever Woman of the Family* by Charlotte Yonge, where I again show the different ways the disability-romance plot plays out with the women of the story, highlighting Yonge's interest in creating the ideal female character.

Persuasion

Jane Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion,* canvases the spectrum of disability, consisting of many characters and plots that focus on people with disabilities. Pamela Kirkpatrick lists all the disabilities she finds within the novel, spanning "a child's dislocated collarbone, a sister's hypochondria, a school friend's chronic disability resulting from rheumatic fever, and Louisa Musgrove's fateful fall on the Cobb in Lyme Regis" (Kirkpatrick 43). John Wilshire goes so far as to describe *Persuasion* as a novel of "trauma, broken bones, and broken hearts" (Wiltshire 165). Austen herself was sick at the time she was writing the story, so her emphasis on disability as a prime engine of plot also corresponds to her biography, making the scope of disabilities she explores in her novel no surprise. Overall, Austen's varied use of disability in *Persuasion* helps showcase how gender impacts the disability-romance plot.

Persuasion highlights the lack of standardization in the female disability-romance plot, in contrast to the male plot, which typically follows a pattern where an arrogant male character becomes disabled and is eventually cared for by a lower-class woman until they marry. In fact, the experiences of women within the story, either as caregivers or people with disabilities, are so varied that Austen does not have a single perspective on what femininity or disability should look like. Because Austen's book highlights both female and male disability, *Persuasion* becomes the perfect study to begin to understand the difference between the disability-romance plot between men and women.

Mrs. Smith

Persuasion is filled with characters who are not able-bodied. One character who has gained a lot of attention in research is Mrs. Smith. Introduced as a "poor widow barely able to live," Mrs. Smith is portrayed as an ordinary, everyday woman (Austen 158). Despite her circumstances, she is a close friend of Anne's and serves as a source of advice and information for her. Previously, many scholars have discussed Mrs. Smith's role in *Persuasion*, mainly focusing on the fact that she is just a convenient side character. For instance, K.K. Collins has criticized her role as a "*deus ex machina*" (Collins 383), while Elaine Bander has noted the traditional limited interpretation of Mrs. Smith in literature:

> Had Austen written this novel without the character of Mrs. Smith, Sir Walter would still have retrenched, Wentworth would still have called at Uppercross, Louisa would still have fallen from the Cobb, Anne would still have gone to Bath, Benwick and Louisa would still have fallen in love, and Wentworth would still have followed Anne to Bath to offer himself to her again. (Bander 77)

Even when Mrs. Smith is thought of as having an important role in the story, she's only seen as a villainous character. Karen Gevirtz explains how "Mrs. Smith… is self-interested…profit

oriented... and commodifies others" (Gevirtz 157). All of these authors discuss the way in which Mrs. Smith is an obsolete character, not needed for any of the plot points.

However, despite what authors have traditionally said, looking at Mrs. Smith through a disability studies lens reveals her character's importance in serving as a warning for widowed women in nineteenth-century society. Although Mrs. Smith is not part of a romantic plot within the story, her status as a widow and her disability work together to highlight the gendered hardships women with disabilities face. As a result, Mrs. Smith actually provides an important example of the consequences of a failed marriage and of a disability. For example, Austen uses Mrs. Smith as a warning for Anne to think carefully about who she will choose to marry, as the wrong choice could leave her widowed and without anything. It was dangerous for widowed women in Victorian society. Peter Earle explains how in early modern England "only a small proportion of widows and single women were living well, a fact that is no surprise, despite the literary emphasis on the wealthy widow" (Earle 167). In fact, as Stephen C. Behrendt points out, the law was not in a widow's favor: "Despite the existence of relatively egalitarian inheritance laws, property laws relating to marriage in Romantic-era Britain (c. 1780-1835) had grown less (rather than more) accommodating to the needs of widows and their children than they had been even a century earlier" (Behrendt 481). As Anne determines her future partner, Mrs. Smith serves as an example of "the lasing repercussions" Lydia Hall explains of "surviving in a genteel world as an unmarried invalid woman…on the fringe of society" (Hall 1). Elaine Bander builds off this and explains how "[Mrs. Smith] reminds readers of the desperate plight of impoverished gentry women on their own, thus predicting Anne's possible 'tragic' future" (Bander 78). Existing as a widow was hard enough during the nineteenth century, but Mrs. Smith shows how it became more complicated to navigate the world as someone who had a disability and

widowed. Mrs. Smith's character is ultimately a reminder to Anne of the bleak side of an unfortunate marriage and the dangers of what happens if one has a disability without a care network.

Furthermore, Mrs. Smith is a great example of a positive portrayal of disability in literature. Although she has flaws, her depiction as a widow with a disability showcases resilience that is not often shown in characters with disabilities. One of the first descriptors of Mrs. Smith is about how she made a name for herself in town. According to Anne "Everybody of any consequence or notoriety in Bath was well known by name to Mrs. Smith" (Austen 193). Mrs. Smith was a great resource for Anne and other members of the community who wanted to know more about the lives of other townsfolk because as a caretaker, Mrs. Smith learned a lot about the goings on of the people she worked for. Elaine Bander emphasizes her resilience, explaining how "Mrs. Smith, despite her disability, remains mentally engaged with the world beyond her sick-room as she gathers up strands of gossip to knit into amusing and consequential tales" (Bander 76). Despite the numerous challenges she faces, Mrs. Smith displays remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. While some readers may perceive her gossip social circle as selfish, her precarious situation reveals that she had limited options. Rather than rendering her insignificant, as some scholars have argued, Mrs. Smith's character illustrates how a woman with a disability can take agency over her life and succeed in the best way she can. Austen's use of Mrs. Smith's character is not just important in the role she plays in the story, but Austen also presents Mrs. Smith as an empowered figure, challenging traditional literary tropes about disability. By broadening the range of experiences of women with disabilities, Austen invites readers to reconsider the ways in which such individuals can navigate relationships and overcome obstacles.

Community of Care for the Navy Men

Persuasion offers the military as an important context for understanding disability. Captain Wentworth is a commander in the British navy, and the story begins when he returns after his stint in the Napoleonic Wars. Austen would have been familiar with naval homecomings as her brothers Francis and Charles had long and successful careers as naval officers. Furthermore, the extent to which there was a large population of naval officers returning from the sea in Britain was astounding. Grace Miller explains how "in 1815 approximately 78,000 sailors were registered as 'borne,' or belonging to a ship, down from about 126,000 the year before; most of those remaining would also be returning to shore" (Miller 237). This raises the question about the state in which these naval officers were returning home. Trina Lorde comments on Austen's use of militarism, saying how "*Persuasion*…introduces battle wounds as an example of the temporary nature of able-bodiedness" (Lorde 6). By thinking about the nature of military service and its connection with disability, *Persuasion* becomes a novel about the ways service officers are impacted by war and how they support their resulting injuries. Captain Wentworth and his friends from service, Captain Harville and Captain Benwick, highlight the ways veterans are impacted physically and mentally by their service and develop their own care communities to provide support for one another.

Mr. Harville provides an example of a care community that forms around those with disabilities. In *Communities of Care,* Talia Schafer details how within literature, individuals form communities around caring for one another, which can be used to provide a support network for a person with a disability. In *Persuasion*, one such care network is between Captain Benwick, Mr. Harville, and Captain Wentworth. Mr. Harville is a man who is in poor health due to an injury he received while serving as a naval officer and relies on his close friends for support. The

introduction to the Wentworth-Harville-Benwick care network begins after Captain Wentworth flees to Lyme to take care of Harville. The bond between the two men is so strong that Austen explains how "Captain Harville had never been in good health since a severe wound which he received two years before, and [so] Captain Wentworth's anxiety to see him had determined him to go immediately to Lyme" (Austen 94). Only by understanding how Mr. Harville had a disability and his need for support from those around him can a reader understand the close care community the group shares. For example, Wentworth periodically discusses his time abroad and the dangers he faced. One time when "[he] had not been six hours in the Sound…a gale came on, which lasted four days and nights.... Four-and-twenty hours later, and I should only have been a gallant Captain Wentworth, in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspapers; and being lost in only a sloop, nobody would have thought about me" (Austen 66). The threat that Wentworth and the other sailors experienced was profound, leaving lasting ties due to the men's shared trauma. Wentworth goes from a man who at war was primarily focused on his own well-being to a man who at home has deep concern in aiding his friends. Overall, the trio's care community serves as an example of how individuals with disabilities form around one another to support their needs.

The relationship between the three men becomes more complicated than Schaffer's original observation when considering the relationship between disability and masculinity. Although the men share the same experience as naval officers, which allows them to form a deep connection, Austen divides the men into different categories where disability and masculinity come into play. For example, where Mr. Harville has a physical disability, he is mentally strong, unlike Captain Benwick, who does not have a physical disability but exhibits mental unsoundness. When faced with challenges in the novel, for example, specifically the death of

Harville's sister, it is Harville with his physical disability who is shown to be more resilient than Captain Benwick with no such disability. Captain Benwick was married to Mr. Harville's sister, who suddenly dies at an early age at the beginning of the novel. While Benwick moves into utter despair, Mr. Harville attempts to stay strong for his family. Trina Lorde comments on this and argues how:

> The Harvilles are also playing host to Captain Benwick, who is in deep mourning for his late fiancée, Captain Harville's sister…This 'state of mind' turns out to be more disabling than Captain Harville's wound. Benwick only reads and weeps, but Harville has taken action, effectively remodeling the house he is renting into a suitable home for his family; he is never idle: His lameness prevented him from taking much exercise; but a mind of usefulness and ingenuity seemed to furnish him with constant employment within. (Lorde 2019)

Building off Lorde's argument helps us understand how disability can actually be a marker of resiliency. Interestingly, Mr. Harville is even described by qualities of traditional masculinity, explaining how he took charge of his family and was not outwardly emotional. Benwick on the other hand was extremely emotional. Austen provides a challenge to the stereotype that men with disabilities are inherently less masculine than people without disabilities. At least, with physical disabilities. Captain Benwick exhibits signs of mental trauma which the readers assume is a result of his time abroad. He may not be thought of as having a traditional physical disability, but Benwick and Harville are mirrored in a sense where both face a type of disabling, just that Benwick's is mental rather than physical.

When compared with one another, Austen makes an interesting argument about what it means to be masculine, and that a strong body does not always equate to the stringent mental traits that are associated with traditional masculinity. She is ultimately able to have Benwick have an outpour of emotions because he is able-bodied. Harville, with a physical disability, would have been unable to show the emotion Benwick showed and still hold the position of

being married. He would have been too feminized with body and mind; therefore, Austen showcases the range of masculinity by mirroring the two men. Gender comes further into play when considering Captain Wentworth who is portrayed as either physically or mentally incapacitated, despite facing the same trauma as his friends. Yet, to be the protagonist's love interest, Captain Wentworth could not have had a disability. His friends even make him look more masculine in comparison to their ailments and therefore better suited for his romantic plot with Anne. Gender dynamics and their interaction with societal standards about disability become extremely important when considering the three men's relationship, and Austen reveals how the intersectionality between disability and masculinity warps the perception of each character in unique ways.

Comparing Two Different Female Disability-Romance Plots

Persuasion deploys two versions of the female disability-romance plot. In one instance, the novel mirrors the pattern I traced in the male disability-romance section: due to Louisa's injury she is better able to be a match for Captain Benwick. In the second instance, Louisa's injuries create an opening for Anne (cast as caretaker) and Captain Wentworth (who feels responsible) to be together. In both instances, Austen reflects upon the ideas of what a temporary nature of able-bodiedness may mean for the characters. In Louisa's case, although she is injured in the middle of the story, she is recovered by the end of the novel. However, even in a temporary state, the Louisa accident allows both Louisa and Benwick to marry, as well as leads to Anne and Captain Wentworth's reunification. By looking at the differences between the romantic plots of the two couples, it becomes clear how disability interacts with gender differently between men and women. For men, the disability plot helps remedy any social

dynamic that prevents the couple from being together. The intersection between femininity and disability is not as simple. While there are similarities to the male disability-romance plot, the female disability-romance plot reshapes the female character to fit not the ideal of femininity in Austen's case, but the best form of femininity for the unique couple.

Captain Benwick and Louisa

Like the disability-romance plot I outlined in *Our Mutual Friend* and *Jane Eyre*, where an accident results in a disability that enables a couple to be together, Louisa and Captain Benwick get together under these circumstances, but instead of the male in the relationship becoming injured, it is the female. Initially, the two are unimaginable as a couple. Captain Benwick begins the novel as a man destroyed by the death of his wife, Fanny Harville. Additionally, Louisa's boisterous character is diametrically opposed to his morose one. Louisa begins the book as a one-dimensional character: cheerful, mostly concerned with appearances, and described as a forgettable and average girl. Benwick, however, is intelligent and searches for a conversation partner. As the novel goes on, he breaks out of his grief and eventually marries Louisa.

Only after Louisa has a near fatal accident does she and Benwick romantically engage with one another. Before her accident, Captain Wentworth had been courting Louisa. During their time together, Louisa injured herself as a result of her high spirits. While playing a game with Captain Wentworth, she attempts to jump off a ledge and be caught by the Captain. Unsurprisingly, the game ended poorly:

> She was safely down, and instantly, to show her enjoyment, ran up the steps to be jumped down again. He advised her against it, thought the jar too great; but no, he reasoned and talked in vain, she smiled and said, 'I am determined I will': he put out his hands; she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement

> on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless! There was no wound, no blood, no visible bruise; but her eyes were closed, she breathed not, her face was like death. The horror of the moment to all who stood around! (Austen 109)

Not paying attention to the potential consequences of her silly game, Louisa risks her life and jumps off the side of a high set of steps which results in her accident. After her near-death experience, she is forced to recover in Lyme where it just so happens that Benwick was staying. Again, as in the male disability-romance plot where the man undergoes a transformation as a result of his injury, Louisa undergoes one as well. Anne describes her transformation by explaining how "the idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection was amusing, but she had no doubt of its being so. The day at Lyme, the fall from the Cobb, might influence her health, her nerves, her courage, her character to the end of her life, as thoroughly as it appeared to have influenced her fate" (Austen 167). With Louisa now interested in literature, she is a suitable spouse to Captain Benwick. Commenting on the magical nature of disability in Louisa and Benwick's relationship, Kathleen Jame-Cavan points out how "temporary disability is an influential presence" on the character's and their relationships (Jame-Cavan 6). Before her accident, Louisa had no interest in literature, and it is never mentioned in the novel. But after, her being in a position to be in the presence of Benwick and his ideas helped allow the pair the opportunity to bond and eventually come together.

What is different between the disability-romance plot with Louisa compared to the male disability-romance pattern is that the change in which Louisa undergoes is not standardized across the novel, and even other novels. Louisa changes from being a shallow, unintelligent girl to someone who is more interested in conversation and serious topics. This change is specifically compatible with Captain Benwick. Although Louisa's change tampers down her high spirits and makes her in comparison quieter and more passive, the focus of her change is to help her be a

better partner for Benwick, not necessarily become more feminine. This is unlike the male disability-romance plot which follows a pattern of feminizing a man to bring together a couple who were not initially able to be together. Austen is not portraying the ideal feminine quality in *Persuasion,* but rather giving an example of how disability can be used to make a woman fit for a particular man.

Anne and Wentworth

Thanks to Louisa's accident, Anne and Captain Wentworth are enabled to reunite and eventually get back together. Initially, Anne and Captain Wentworth had previously been engaged with one another. However, due to differences in wealth and rank, Anne was persuaded to break off the engagement. Eight years prior, before Captain Wentworth left for the navy, he "had no fortune" (Austen 27). Therefore, Anne's family believed the couple was unsuitable for one another. Notoriously vain (indeed, the narrator informs us that "vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character," Sir Walter, Anne's father, believed that his family should only marry those of high class (Austen 27). Therefore, he believed that Captain Wentworth lacked the qualities to deserve his daughter. And unfortunately, as Trina Lorde points out, "[Anne] lacked authority", and was persuaded to give up her engagement to be in compliance with her family (Lorde 207).

However, after Louisa's accident, they are reunited under different financial circumstances. After their broken-off engagement, Wentworth goes off to war and comes home with a fortune "[no] less than twenty thousand pounds" (Austen 75). As he gained money, the Elliots fell into financial trouble. Anne explains how "her father was growing distressed for money" causing them to downsize houses and rent out their family estate (Austen 9). Therefore,

although they were not in contact with one another, their social status was now more equal than it had been when they were younger. It is because of Louisa's accident that they were able to spend more time together as they both moved back to Bath: "The sad accident at Lyme was soon the prevailing topic…that Captain Wentworth…returned…without any present intention of quitting it any more" (Austen 126). Although they had interacted with one another previously in the novel, they had not lived in the same location for extended periods of time. When living in Bath, they would run into one another in town and talk at dances. Ultimately, their distant flirting culminates when Captain Wentworth finally writes a love letter to Anne explaining "I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant. You alone have brought me to Bath" (Austen 237). They come together on more equal terms and with a better understanding of each other. Louisa's accident makes her ineligible to be with Captain Wentworth, freeing him to pursue Anne and providing him with the opportunity to relocate closer to her. It may not have been Anne or Wentworth who was injured in the accident, but Louisa's disability allowed them to be together.

Anne and Wentworth also show how the female disability-romance plot is not primarily focused on making the female partner more feminine but on making her the best-suited character for her partner. In this case, it is Anne's role as a caretaker that makes Wentworth realize his affection for her. Not only is *Persuasion* riddled with accidents and injuries among the cast of characters, but the novel dedicates a lot of time to exploring how these characters are taken care of and nursed back to health. Anne, specifically, acts as a nurse for multiple characters. Through her ability to take care of others, she demonstrates her determined and kind personality, both of which Captain Wentworth specifically explains are qualities he looks for in women. At the beginning of the novel, Wentworth describes his ideal woman as having "a strong mind, with

sweetness of manners….that is the woman I want" (Austen 62). He does not just want a woman who has a polite character, but one who is intelligent and strong.

Anne's ability to take charge in the stressful situations of both Charles and Louisa's injuries makes her the ideal woman for Captain Wentworth. Louisa's accident is not the only one in the story. The first accident is when young Charles Musgrove is found with a broken collarbone after falling from a tree. Charles' "collar bone was found to be dislocated, and such injury received in the back as roused the most alarming ideas" (Austen 53). Due to a potential back injury, everyone was worried. Austen describes how "it was an afternoon of distress" (Austen 53). Luckily, Anne is able to come to the rescue and was able to "[do everything] at once; the apothecary to send for, the father to have pursued and informed, the mother to support and keep from hysterics, the servants to control, the youngest child to banish, and the poor suffering one to attend and soothe" (Austen 53). Quick on her feet, Anne is able to aid the young boy and does such a good caretaking job for the Musgrove family that they trust her to leave his care in her hands. Pamela Kirkpatrick describes how "Anne's nursing skills, it turns out, are needed at Uppercross for more than attendance to her sister's vague illnesses. After Mary's older son Charles, sustains a bad fall, the calm and competent aunt immediately takes charge" (Kilpatrick 45). Anne's ability to nurse Charles back to health demonstrates her strong-headedness, as well as her intelligence as a great caretaker.

Additionally, when Louisa falls, Anne demonstrates her ability to act as a nurse once again. The horrible accident that leaves Louisa close to death forces Anne to quickly come to her aid. The family is so thankful for her aid and describes how "no one [is] so proper, so capable as Anne" (Austen 114). The Musgrove family even insists that Anne stay and continue to take care of Louisa: "'You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her' and Anne responds 'most

willing, ready, happy to remain'" (Austen 114). Kirkpatrick observes how unlike the rest of her family, who are vain, her sister Mary is even described as "selfish," "only Anne seems to understand the benefits of providing help to others" (Kirkpatrick 46). Although Anne does not have a disability or cares for Wentworth, which was the pattern for the male disability-romance plot, Anne's role as a nurse shows Captain Wentworth her ability to help and care for others, as well as her strong character.

Overall, the two female disability-romance plots in *Persuasion* help to highlight how women are treated differently in each relationship. The plot does not aim to impose a standardized ideal for a woman in a relationship; instead, it strives to transform the female character into the most compatible partner for her male counterpart. Where the disability-romance plot emphasizes Anne's ability to be a caregiver, the plot for Louisa emphasizes her mellowness and interest in literature. But what is so interesting about the female disability plot is that because the ideals for women were changing during the nineteenth century, Austen is not putting forth an argument about what the ideal woman looks like. Rather, the female disability-romance plot in *Persuasion* is primarily used as a literary tool to shape the relationships that best fit the story.

The Woman in White

The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins is a mystery novel with a complicated romance plot in the middle. The novel follows the conspiracy of Count Fosco and Sir Percival as they try to protect their family's secret and secure wealth from Laura Fairlie. As a result, Laura Fairlie, Marian Halcombe, and Walter Hartright attempt to foil their plot and protect each other. However, although the trio eventually bests Fosco and Percival, they do not escape unscathed, as

Laura's abusive relationship with Percival leaves her traumatized and mentally unsound. Unlike the male disability-romance plot, which primarily focused on physical disability, I will analyze how mental disability impacts the female disability-romance plot. I will also look at how Walter's continued interest in Laura, even after a mental illness that reduces her to a helpless child, serves as a warning from Collins as to the dangers and repercussions of marriage in Victorian England.

Historical Context of Mental Disability in Nineteenth-Century England

Around the beginning of the 1800s, mental health care reform spread throughout England, changing the attitude towards mental healthcare. For the first time, "local authorities had a legal responsibility for the care of mentally ill people in purpose-built accommodation. The shift in emphasis from 'custody to cure' of mentally ill people resulted in a flurry of legislation" ("The Victorian Mental Asylum"). It was no longer acceptable to keep poor mentally ill people locked up in homes, as is portrayed in *Jane Eyre* where Rochester holds Bertha Mason in his attic room; therefore private or state asylums became increasingly popular. One legislative reform was the Lunacy Act of 1845. Barbara Fass Leavy explains how the movement "ended the first stage of reform of lunatic asylums which more closely resembled torture chambers than they did places to cure or help the mentally ill" (Leavy 93). The 1845 Act appointed a new group of Lunacy Commissioners whose "main powers lay in their responsibility to inspect both state hospitals and what were called 'licensed houses,' that is, private asylums of the kind to which [the fictional] Anne Catherick and later Laura Fairlie are confined [in *The Woman in White*]" (Leavy 94). However, despite making advancements in improving patient's conditions, the private asylums still remained suspect. Walter Marshall, a man admitted to Ticehurst House

Asylum in England, accounts how still in May of 1876 that he witnessed “an old man treated very cruelly” (Berkenkotter 10) and the Commissioners in Lunacy found “lunatics confined in dark and reeking cells, strapped down in their beds or to chairs” (Showalter 314).

And the reason patients' treatment in asylums was notoriously cruel was because of the strong connection in Victorian society between mental disability and moral disability. As Courtney Andree argues, disability was “increasingly imagined as a marker of national and familial decline in the scientific and popular literature of the day, [and] people with disabilities were refigured as domestic threats in the late-19th century, and increasingly immersed in a culture of shame and secret keeping” (Andree 1). While we can see in Victorian literature that the “physically disabled and weak are portrayed as strangely free from moral corruption…[a person’s] mental ‘ability’ and morality were intrinsically linked” (Schillace 587). For example, the term idiot “was disaggregated into various taxonomies and, eventually, hierarchies that included incurable versus educable idiocy, imbecility, and mental deficiency” (Holmes 10). A disability became synonymous with insufficiency, and in the case of *The Woman in White,* disability is shown to be connected to intellectual failing. For example, Anne Catherick, the half-sister of Laura Fairlie escapes imprisonment in an insane asylum and is continuously characterized as “weak in the head” (Collins 855) and her “intellect is not developed as it ought to be at her age” (Collins 89). She is dehumanized because of the effects the trauma has on her character. When Walter brings up Sir Percival, the man who imprisoned her, she has a panic attack and is associated with an animal:

> The instant I risked that chance reference to the person who had put her in the Asylum she sprang up on her knees. A most extraordinary and startling change passed over her. Her face, at all ordinary times so touching to look at, in its nervous sensitiveness, weakness, and uncertainty, became suddenly darkened by an expression of maniacally intense hatred and fear, which communicated a wild, unnatural force to every feature. Her eyes dilated in the dim evening light, like the

> eyes of a wild animal. She caught up the cloth that had fallen at her side, as if it had been a living creature that she could kill, and crushed it in both her hands with such convulsive strength, that the few drops of moisture left in it trickled down on the stone beneath her. (Collins 161-162)

The repeated association with animals and savagery shows how Anne is tainted by her trauma, which impacted her intelligence but also her character's sanity. Her emotions fluctuate, quickly bursting into fits, highlighting her instability. Overall, Anne is judged for her mental illness: those around her believe she is an idiot and characterize her as deficient due to her unladylike outbursts.

Women were confined in asylums more frequently than men and for longer. Statistics suggest that "women stayed in the asylums for longer periods than men…[as] the average stay for a man was 3.7 years, for a woman 6 years" and according to the census of 1871, "for every 1,000 male lunatics, there were 1,182 female lunatics (Showalter 316, 315). Charles Dickens attributes the difference in men and women's stays in asylums to the fact that "female servants are, as is well known, more frequently afflicted with lunacy than any other class of persons" (Showalter 313). There was the idea that Victorian women were thought of as "suppressed" and "fragile" and as a result more susceptible to mental unrest (Pegg 220). Accounts from the time would even confirm some of these stereotypes. According to Elaine Showalter:

> Within the asylums, female patients often shocked both doctors and male patients by their rowdiness, restlessness, and use of obscene language. 'Female lunatics are less susceptible to control than males,' declared one male inmate of the Glasgow Royal Asylum. 'They are more troublesome, more noisy, and more abusive in their language.' (Showalter 320)

But, as Showalter argues, female asylum patients often seemed more restless because "they had fewer opportunities than men for outdoor activity, active recreations, or even movement within the building" (Showalter 321). Knowing today that women were often deemed insane or lunatics for no other reason than their gender, the statistics do not shock a modern reader.

Responding to this contemporary context, and perhaps capitalizing on public interest in public scandals,[6] Wilkie Collins made women's mistreatment in asylums central to *The Woman in White.* Not just one, but two of his characters, Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, are sent to insane asylums. In both instances, their sentence to the asylum was to prevent the women from sharing the secret of Sir Percival's family lineage. Despite the awareness of reform by the time Collins published the book in 1859, the readers of *The Woman in White* would still have been cautious of characters who visited insane asylums. Elaine Showalter observes that for women specifically, "the stigma of certification [of insanity] remained powerful" (Showalter 318). This was because women were thought to have a "predisposition to derangement" (Showalter 322). Showalter's observations help modern readers of *The Women in White* understand that the topic of insanity and the treatment of mental illness, especially among women, was a contemporary interest for the Victorian public and would have been sharply on Collin's mind when he was writing his novel. Therefore, as Barbara Fass Leavy discusses, Collins was able to use the "conceptions of his time, with their peculiarly conflicting logic, to advantage, heightening the mystery surrounding his woman in white by arousing genuine doubt about [his character's] madness" (Leavy 98). Mental disability, as Matthew Thomas suggests, "became such a potent subject for concern [as it] provided a symbol which linked these overlapping anxieties about moral, demographic, and racial decline" (Thomson 22). Together, these writers point to how the

[6] It was popular during the nineteenth century for news articles to cover the abuses in insane asylums. To gain more insight into the types of articles published the British Newspaper Archive from the 1800s until the 1890s provides a great resource for understanding the news at the time. Even today researchers have conducted investigations into the harm done in mental institutions during this time period. Jennifer Wallis explains how "In the 1870s several British asylums came under close scrutiny in the popular and medical press. A number of patient deaths were reported that had a disturbing feature in common: broken ribs. The most alarming was the case of Rees Price, an elderly blind patient admitted to Carmarthen Asylum who had died shortly after admission. A postmortem found eight broken ribs and it was alleged that Price had received no proper medical examination upon admission, nor any special attention when he began to exhibit breathing difficulties" (Wallis 3). This abuse was not only rampant in England, but later in the U.S., the same criticism was made for mental health asylums in the states. A very famous piece documenting the experience of women in asylums is Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* where she demonstrates the unique problems women in asylums have.

interest in insane asylums combined with the heightened anxieties about the dangers of people with mental disabilities, made the use of mental illness in the mysteries in *The Woman in White* beneficial for Collins to create a story about mistrust, doubt, and interest surrounding what happened to the women who entered the insane asylums.

Dangers of Marriage

While disability can be depicted as a positive attractive force that bonds a relationship, as seen in the male disability-romance plot, *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins shows how unhealthy relationships can have negative mental health consequences. Unlike *Jane Eyre* and *Our Mutual Friend,* which glorify and romanticize disability, Collins portrays disability in a more serious light. The clearest instance of presenting the negative consequences of a romantic relationship in *The Woman in White* is between Laura and Sir Percival. In the novel, the mistreatment of Laura by her husband Sir Percival results in her mental trauma and change of character. Throughout the novel, it is revealed that Sir Percival is not the kind honorable man he appears to be initially, but that he is actually very hot-tempered and cruel. Sir Percival physically abuses Laura, in one instance leaving bruises on her skin "'I was alone with him, Marian—his cruel hand was bruising my arm—what could I do?'" (Collins 477). Yet, despite her abuse, Laura is secretive about her marriage. For example, her sister Marian notices in Laura's letters how "not a word can I find anywhere which tells me plainly that she is reconciled to her marriage" (Collins 316). Then, after Laura comes back from her honeymoon, Marian describes how her sister has changed: "[Laura] has found me unaltered, but I have found her changed. Changed in person, and in one respect changed in character" (Collins 322). Marian misses the sister she had before the marriage, explaining how "I miss something when I look at her-

something that once belonged to the happy, innocent life of Laura Fairlie, and that I cannot find in Lady Glyde" (Collins 332). Laura's abuse within her marriage causes her to develop symptoms of what today would be called post-traumatic stress disorder and her resulting total change in demeanor.

Although Laura's story is tragic, it was not unusual for the nineteenth century. Due to the oppressive marital norms of Victorian England, Laura was up for failure from the very beginning. In the novel, the reader finds out that Sir Percival wants to marry Laura in order to gain access to her inheritance as he is in financial distress. Collins informs the reader that part of Laura's "inheritance was, in itself, a comfortable little fortune. It was derived under her father's will, and it amounted to the sum of twenty thousand pounds" (Collins 234). This meant that if Sir Percival were to marry Laura and convince her to sign away her inheritance to him, all of her wealth would be in his name, and thus his plan to marry her for her money. This would not have been unusual at the time as a wife was seen as inferior to her husband and under his control. In regards to familial finances, "[the wife] took a smaller share of the family's resources, so that the husband and then the children could be provided for first. The implication is that the wife's role in the family's finances was limited to demanding as little as possible" (Maltby 199). Heather Nelson explains how "Laura resembles most nineteenth-century middle- and upper-class fiancées of all ages, 'passive throughout the settlement process' because male family members and lawyers control those documents" (Nelson 81). Laura was at the mercy of the people around her as "Glyde [who] represents the figure of the abusive husband…wields total control over his legally disempowered wife" (Cox 141). Ultimately, this meant that after Laura and Sir Percival were married, she would lose control of her life and wealth.

But, this was not for a lack of trying to keep her autonomy. Collins shows the futility of women trying to push back against the marital system in *The Women in White,* ultimately commenting on how it was oppressive to women at the time. Sir Percival tries his hardest to pressure Laura into signing documents that would provide him with her wealth. He explains to his lawyer that "If the [signature] *must* be done it *shall* be done" (Collins 355). But, despite trying to pressure Laura into signing the document she explains that "'If my signature pledges me to anything,' she said, 'surely I have some claim to know what that pledge is?'" (Collins 386). In an uncharacteristic expression of autonomy, Laura sticks up for herself and refuses to sign the document without knowing what it is about. Despite Sir Percival's attempt to influence her due to his power as a man and husband "Laura does not write or sign anything in this novel consisting of personal documents about her marriage" (Nelson 84). However, it is all for nothing because Laura is unable to stop her marriage from occurring, and once married, Sir Percival exercises his evil plot to frame her death and ultimately gains access to her wealth. Using the female disability-romance plot, Collins shows how Percival is able to control Laura, and shows the repercussions of an abusive marriage on a woman's psyche, using Laura as a prime example of the mental health consequences.

Increasing Femininity Through Disability

Like the male disability-romance plot that uses disability as a way to make a male character embody fewer masculine traits, the female plot also works to make the female character more feminine. In *The Woman in White,* both Marian and Laura go through a transformation into hyper-feminized characters due to their illness and trauma respectively. At the beginning of the novel, Walter observes Marian for the first time and exclaims how "[she] is

dark….[she] is young…[she] is ugly!" (Collins 49). Walter, like many other characters throughout the novel, describes Marian as the opposite of the ideal beautiful dainty woman of the Victorian era and instead gives her more masculine qualities. In fact, Ann Gaylin describes how "Marian embodies the 'strong-minded' woman writers and heroines castigated for being 'denatured' or 'unwomanly' because they thought and acted in a manner which contradicted normative 'feminine' behavior'" (Gaylin 6).

However, midway through the novel, Marian becomes extremely ill, and as a result, her character undergoes a transformation that heightens her feminine qualities. In order to investigate the evil plans of Sir Percival and Count Fosco, Marian goes to listen in on their conversation, wanting to hear about their plan to kill Laura and to acquire her money. Knowing that Fosco and Percival will discuss their intentions in the library, Marian slips out of the building, scrambles across the rooftop, and hides where she can overhear their talk. She then hears Fosco confirm that both he and Percival are in need of money because they are in debt. But, despite her resourcefulness in figuring out the men's plan, the horrible weather "drenched [her] to the skin, cramped in every limb, cold to the bones, a useless, helpless, panic-stricken creature" (Collins 535). As a result, Marian falls ill and is forced to rest in bed for many weeks. Therefore, in the second half of the novel, Ann Gaylin argues that Collins "stresses Marian's diminished position in the narrative primarily as a passive character rather than active, narrating subject. Collins presents her now as the male hero's confidante, rather than as his advisor or the chief plotter" (Gaylin 6). Rather than the fiery and sophisticated woman depicted at the beginning of the book, who more closely resembled a male character in Victorian literature, Marian is quiet and timid by the end of the novel, as a result of her illness.

Similar to Marian, Laura's disability increases her character's femininity. As Laura faces more mental health challenges, she is progressively seen as a helpless child. After Marian helps Laura escape from the insane asylum, the sisters and Walter hide away in an apartment in order to protect Laura. While there, Walter describes Laura as "utter[ly] helplessness" where he "feared touching too soon some secret sensitiveness in her which my instinct as a man might not have been fine enough to discover" (Collins 891). Walter and Marian even describe how they had to amuse Laura with "children's games at cards and with scrap-books full of prints" (Collins 696). Laura is seen as a weak girl who cannot handle the reality of her situation. Her character becomes only about the fact that she is helpless and cannot do anything for herself - just like a child.

During the nineteenth century, the characteristics of a child and an ideal woman were similar. The Victorian ideology:

> Expected [women] to be submissive and dependent on their husbands and relegating them in the private sphere of the house. In this way they were denied any possibility for an individual identity, apart from that of wife and mother. Moreover, they represented powerful patriarchal icons of stable property, exchangeable between men to reinforce their family bonds and networks. (Fiorato 30)

Like a child who is dependent on their guardian, many Victorian commentators suggested that a woman should be dependent on their husband. Natalie Huffles explains how the series of imprisonments leaves Laura "cognitively impaired, amnesiac, and dependent on others" (Huffles 45). Laura is timid like a child and even seems to have the intelligence of a young person. Whereas disability in the disability-romance plot made a man less masculine and thus broke free from nineteenth-century stereotypes of what masculinity should be, disability for women pushes them further into the stereotype of the ideal femininity. Today, the comparison between women

and children is seen as problematic, but in Victorian society, it would have been embraced in literature because of the embodiment of the ideal, timid, quiet woman.

How the Disability-Romance Plot Harms Women to Benefit Men

Although it seems counterintuitive that a disability would make a person fit better into the stereotypes of the Victorian century, *The Woman in White* shows how when women have a disability or are impaired, they exhibit qualities that are *more* attractive to a romantic relationship, rather than less. Even though Walter views Laura as a child, he still finds her romantically attractive. Walter describes how Laura "spoke as a child might have spoken" and "she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown me," yet he still fantasizes about her (Collins 700). Laura may be a "sad sight of the change in her from her former self," but she was "the one interest of [Walter's] love, an interest of tenderness and compassion" (Collins 728). Desire, according to Martha Stoddard Holmes in *The Woman in White,* is "thus linked to intellectual disability…Collins seems to posit the attractiveness and sublimity of entering a literal contact zone with mental difference" (Holmes 11). Furthermore, as Laura becomes more childish and therefore dependent, she also loses part of her identity. No longer is she seen as an adult woman, but reduced only to her mental disability and what remains of her beauty. Il-Yeong Kim and Jungyoun Kim add to this point and explain how "Laura does not assume her importance as an individual. Her significance lies in her function as a signifier of desire. That is, Laura exists as the embodiment or representation/signifier of abstract beauty that hangs on the wall of a gallery, while Walter is a viewer who gazes at it with fantasmatic illusion" (Kim 45). On the surface, it might seem that disability would render a character less desirable, but in this novel, disability has the opposite effect. Laura's mental disability heightens her child-like qualities, including acting

more timid and shyer, which reflect ideals regarding traditional femininity, therefore, making her more desirable, not less.

When Laura and Walter first meet, Walter is infatuated with her. He immediately emphasizes that "something [is] wanting, something [is] wanting" when he sees Laura for the first time (Collis 78). In the first half of the novel, Walter observes little else besides Laura, giving long and emotional declarations of his feelings to her sporadically. He explains how only after mere days of being Laura's teacher how "The poor weak words, which have failed to describe Miss Fairlie, have succeeded in betraying the sensations she awakened in me. It is so with us all. Our words are giants when they do us an injury, and dwarfs when they do us a service. I loved her" (Collins 96). But sadly, Laura was already engaged to another. Due to her promised marriage to Sir Percival, Walter cannot act on his feelings. Sir Percival and Laura both outranked Walter, an art teacher in status, as well as financially. Yet, this did not stop him from feeling strong emotions about the proposal, exclaiming "I hate him" about Percival (Collins 96). Walter is confined to his emotions, where right before Laura is engaged, he watched her as she sleeps and explains how:

> My own love! with all your wealth, and all your beauty, how friendless you are! The one man who would give his heart's life to serve you is far away, tossing, this stormy night, on the awful sea. Who else is left to you? No father, no brother—no living creature but the helpless, useless woman who writes these sad lines, and watches by you for the morning, in sorrow that she cannot compose, in doubt that she cannot conquer. Oh, what a trust is to be placed in that man's hands to-morrow! If ever he forgets it—if ever he injures a hair of her head! (Collins 306)

Walter uses language that describes Laura as a helpless creature that he hopes to acquire. Already before her abusive marriage, Laura's appeal was due to her resemblance to a child. Walter wants to save Laura because she appears to be helpless, but he is prevented from doing so due to her engagement and his lack of status.

Walter's desire for Laura continues, even after her changed mental state because her increased reliance on him for help feeds into the heroic stereotype that a man should provide for a woman. And who needs more help than a child-like woman? As Andrew Mangham argues, "Laura's femininity is reduced to an instrument to strengthen Walter's insecure masculinity" (Kim 45). For Walter, "[Laura is] the very epitome of sexualized femininity" (Mangham 124). His connection with her is nothing more than physical as her mental disability prevents them from engaging in many conversations. He describes how "When I touched her by accident I felt my heart beating fast, as it used to beat at Limmeridge House—I saw the lovely answering flush glowing again in her cheeks, as if we were back among the Cumberland Hills" (Collins 891). His fantasy over Laura is directly tied to her standing in as this ideal woman due to her extreme timidness and dependency.

Similar to the male disability-romance plot where there is an equalizing of status due to disability, disability in *The Woman in White* accomplishes a character equilibrium that allows for the possibility of Laura and Walter getting married. At first, Walter starts off as being controlled by his desires. When he meets Anne Catherick for the first time he is distracted by her beauty and decides to aid her, despite knowing she is an escapee from an asylum. Collins writes how "she came close to me and laid her hand, with a sudden gentle stealthiness, on my bosom—a thin hand; a cold hand (when I removed it with mine) even on that sultry night. Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman's. 'Will you promise?' 'Yes'" (Collins 36). It is only later does he stop and thinks "What had I done?" because he was distracted by Anne's beauty (Collins 45). Rachel Ablow explains how "Walter's susceptibility to his sensations has prevented him from asking these questions until it is too late" (Albow 162). Walter is not the strong typical Victorian man, but instead controlled by his own desires. Again,

and again he has long exclamations about him feeling emotional. He explains how the "charm of [Laura's] presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position" (Collins 81) and how Laura forced "all the discretion, all the experience, which had availed me with other women, and secured me against other temptations, failed me with her" (Collins 98). His "hardly-earned self-control was as completely lost" after talking with Laura (Collins 99). Walter does not have a grip on his emotions, instead, they cause him to act on his feelings.

However, after leaving for an international destination he pronounces how he will "come back a changed man" (Collins 651). Due to Laura's reliance on others due to her disability, Walter begins to take on the role of a more traditional strong man as he takes care of Laura. In other words, in comparison to Laura's weaker composition after her abusive relationship, Walter looks in comparison a stronger man, as well as has more opportunities to help and take care of Laura. Jenny Bourne Taylor explains how "Hartright's new subjective identity is constructed" so that he may become "his own and Laura's moral manager" (Taylor 108). It is through the comparison of Walter with Laura, the extra-weak woman, that Walter can shine as her caretaker and exemplify the ideals of the strong masculine man. When the trio live together he acts very protective over Marian and Laura saying how "I arranged, for the present at least, that neither Marian nor Laura should stir outside the door without my being with them, and that in my absence from home they should let no one into their rooms on any pretense whatever" (Collins 691). He is useful and tries to coax Laura "She spoke as a child might have spoken, she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them. I waited a few minutes longer—waited to tell her that she was dearer to me now than she had ever been in the past. "Try to get well again," I said, encouraging the new hope in the future which I saw dawning in her mind" (Collins 700). Ultimately, Walter starts out being below her in money and status, but due to her disability,

Collins is able to redefine Walter to increase his masculinity and thus his compatibility with Laura.

The Problems of Marriage in Victorian Society

Collins also makes use of Laura's disability as a way to highlight the oppressive norms of marriage in Victorian culture that harm women. Laura's trauma as a result of her marriage shows the unfortunate end of an abusive relationship and the powerlessness of women. At the center of the novel is a story about an abusive marriage. A common convention of sensationalist novels, Il-Yeong Kim explains, was to "exploit the fear that the respectable Victorian family had some dark secret at its core" (Kim 13). Collins uses this trope in *The Woman in White* as the secret of Sir Percival's family drives the drama in the novel. Having Laura have a disability, makes the reader wonder what happened to her and heightens the problems in their relationship, as seen in the scene where Laura is forced to sign her name for money and when she is placed in the asylum and cannot do anything. Ultimately, Laura's disability is used by Collins to criticize the ways in which women were helpless in marriage.

Collins connects Laura's disability with her silencing to show how oppressive marriage can be and the taboo of speaking up. Due to Laura's trauma, Marian and Walter avoid discussing her past in fear of harming her mental state even more. As a result, the trio make a deal with one another to not discuss the past. Marian explain how:

> 'My darling Walter,' she said, 'must we really account for our boldness in coming here? I am afraid, love, I can only explain it by breaking through our rule, and referring to the past.' 'There is not the least necessity for doing anything of the kind,' said Marian. 'We can be just as explicit, and much more interesting, by referring to the future.' (Collins 1002)

They refuse to talk about the past because they do not want to upset Laura. According to Deborah Mae Fratz "Victorian society could more comfortably accept disability's association with non-autonomy" (Fratz 14). Laura's disability making her reliant on others would not have been offensive at the time, as "disabled people…[were] relegated to limited roles, and [were] usually associated with pity and sympathy" (Fratz 4). The readers of *The Woman in White* would have felt sympathetic towards Laura and would not question Laura being private about what occurred between her and Sir Percival. What occurred between Laura and Sir Percival, her lasting disability was enough for the reader to understand she was abused, and thus Collins is able to show her powerlessness in the novel.

Anne Catherick

In *The Woman in White,* the characters of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie are mirrored throughout the text. Half-sisters, they look alike and go through similar trauma, specifically both being put inside a mental asylum. However, when Laura gets a happy ending, Anne dies at the hands of Sir Percival and Count Fosco. So, in spite of their similarities, what makes Anne an excusable victim in Collin's eyes, while Laura is cast as a heroine? By looking at how their mental illness affected their characters respectively, it becomes apparent how Anne's demeanor of being outspoken and rash compared to Laura's passivity made her the easy scapegoat for Collin's story. Collins is able to comment on how women fill in roles in society and how when Anne steps away from the traditional ideals of femininity and she dies. Thus, Anne becomes an example of what could happen if a woman exists outside Victorian gender norms.

From her first appearance, Sidia Fiorato explains how "Anne is closely associated with a taint of madness which she constantly tries to counteract. Actually, she is never pronounced as

insane in the novel but she is referred to as a person of ‘unsound mind’ through a set of conventions and allusions related to her odd behavior” (Fiorato 253). Like Laura, Anne was sent to an asylum because of her connection with Sir Percival's secret. However, unlike Laura who is rescued from the asylum, Anne dies because of her involvement with Sir Percival's evil plans. The difference between the women’s fates lies in their different demeanors. Unlike Laura or even Marian who come to embody a heightened femininity and the ideals of a woman in the nineteenth century, Anne is more cunning and outspoken. Fiorato explains how “Anne’s inscription into mental disability is therefore to be intended as a metaphor for her social disability, due to her condition as illegitimate, as will be explained later in the novel, but also to her disruption of the feminine passive ideal through her assertive will” (Fiorato 255). This is seen when Anne is talking to Walter about her initial escape. She explains how “It was easy to escape [. . .] They never suspected me as they suspected the others. I was so quiet, and so obedient, and so easily frightened” (Collins 153). Therefore, “revealing a strong will and a cunning ability to impersonate the role of the lunatic imposed on her to her own advantage” (Fiorato 255). Anne demonstrates more resistance against the people who have wronged her, unlike Laura who falls victim to her trauma. It is because of her embodying less female traits that Anne appears unhinged. She even writes an anonymous letter to Laura to convince her of the evils of her husband. The letter is described as “a vile attempt to injure Sir Percival Glyde in my sister's estimation” (Collins 119). She would never have been suitable for a marriage plot because she had a mental disability and was not timid. Collins highlights Anne’s unladylike qualities to warn about the roles in which women fit, using disability as a way to heighten or decrease their femininity.

Anne Catherick's character serves as a poignant reminder about how the female disability-romance plot operates in *The Woman in White.* Unlike Laura, who conforms to the societal standards outlined by Collins, Anne does not fit into the passive, Victorian woman box. As a result, she is marked as insane and meets a tragic end. Meanwhile, Laura conforms to the expectations of Victorian society and becomes the ideal wife to Walter, even if it resulted from her transformation into a dependent child and a loss of status. By comparing Laura and Anne, Collins highlights the dangers of marriage for women and the oppressive norms that govern their lives. Both women suffer in their own ways, Anne because she does not fit into traditional gender norms, and Laura because of her marriage. Through its portrayal of characters like Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, *The Woman in White* helps to demonstrate the challenges faced by women in Victorian society, particularly the hardships experienced by women with disabilities in a culture that Collins highlights that demanded conformity to strict gender roles and societal expectations.

The Clever Woman of the Family

The Clever Woman of the Family by Charlotte Yonge, like *Persuasion*, has romance and marriage at the forefront of its plot. However, although the novel primarily focuses on female characters, Yonge's story has long been criticized for its anti-feminist messages. The main theme of *The Clever Woman* is that women need the guidance of men through marriage or else they face drastic consequences. Using her protagonist, Rachel, Yonge makes it clear that when a woman attempts to be ambitious without a man guiding her, it only ends in trouble. As part of crafting her message, Yonge utilizes the disability-romance plot, where midway through the novel Rachel undergoes a serious illness that not only has physical repercussions but also

symbolically marks her change from an independent woman to one who recognizes the importance of marriage. Therefore, following a similar outline to the male disability-romance plot, Rachel undergoes an illness, is humbled, and therefore becomes able to get married to her suitor Alick Keith. However, *The Clever Woman of the Family* has not only one couple who navigate disability and romance, but two. Ermine Williams is born with a disability but by the end of the novel marries Colin Keith, a man who attempts to court her the entire book. By looking at the comparison between "juxtaposed invalids" as Silvia Wagner terms Rachel and Ermine, the female disability-romance plot actually provides a more feminist read of *The Clever Woman of the Family* than critics usually allow (Wagner 6). Although Rachel's story is clear in its message that women need the guidance of men, Ermine's love story and her financial independence as a person with a disability complicate Yonge's message. Thus, in this section, I will investigate the way Yonge juxtaposes Rachel and Ermine's relationships to show a more nuanced feminist understanding of *The Clever Woman of the Family.*

Death and Disability

The Clever Woman of the Family begins as it follows Rachel Curtis, a strong-minded and ambitious woman who is determined to leave a lasting impact with her life. From creating a trade school for poor girls to attempting to rescue women from an exploitative lace-making production, Rachel does her best to do good in her community. However, from the beginning of the novel to the end, Rachel's character completely changes from a proto-feminist to a dependent housewife. Although *The Clever Woman of the Family* follows mostly unmarried women characters, it does not work to empower female independence but actually serves to critique what Yonge sees as the problem of unmarried women. As many writers and feminist critics have

pointed out, Yonge's novel pushes the idea that cleverness can only get a woman so far, and that women actually need men to guide them in the proper direction. Pharaoh Francis summarizes the common argument about Yonge's intentions and explains how "Yonge emphasizes the need for strong male guidance, dramatizing the dangerous repercussions of 'monstrous' behavior, both to the woman herself and to her family and community" (Francis 203). Although on the surface, the novel may appear to promote strong-minded women as Rachel begins the novel with extraordinary ambition, Yonge actually uses the female disability-romance plot to serve as a way to criticize the clever type of women and demonstrate what she believes is proper womanhood: a married and obedient woman.

It is not only with Rachel that Yonge highlights the importance of what a good woman should be, but throughout the novel, all the women are judged based on the idea that women should rely on men and are helpless without marriage. A great example of this is seen with Rachel's cousin Fanny. Fanny is introduced into the story as a helpless widow with seven children. At only sixteen, Fanny was married to Sir Stephen Temple who was sixty years old and was a general in the military, meaning they lived abroad until his death. After his death, Fanny moves back to England and relies on others to help her with her rambunctious children. But even before her husband's death, Fanny was described as weak, having an unnamed disability causing her to be ill most of the time: "From the moment of her marriage with the kind old General…she was almost constantly disabled by her state of health, and was kept additionally languid and helpless by the effects of climate" (Yonge 67). But luckily, Sir Stephen made sure that Fanny was "scarcely aware of… danger, and not allowed to witness…suffering" (Yonge 67-68). Fanny "embodies the Victorian ideal [of femininity] in its most extreme form" according to Janice Fiamengo because she relies on her husband as not only a wife but is described as so subservient

that she is almost like his daughter (Fiamengo 96). Yonge highlights Fanny and General Temple's age difference and explains how "the chivalrous old man [had] taken on himself the charge of her [and] still regarded the young mother of his children as almost as much of a baby herself" and when he dies Fanny felt as if it was "more like the loss of her own father than of the father of her children" (Yonge 68). The emphasis on Fanny's status as both a daughter and wife to Sir Stephen highlights her reliance on him like a child on a parent. When he dies, she is lost and struggles without him. Yonge uses Fanny to represent the need for marriage and a man to guide a woman because, without one, like in Fanny's case, she is helpless to raise her kids and survive on her own.

Although a lot of critics have focused on Rachel and Yonge's antifeminist marriage messages, less have looked at how Yonge goes about changing Rachel's character. Interestingly, Yonge follows the outlines of the male disability-romance plot I outlined in Chapter One, where Rachel, through death and disability, eventually becomes a better woman for a romance plot. However, as in *Persuasion,* the female disability-romance plot is not standard in the way it changes a character. This is because it conforms to make a woman ideal for the man in each respective story. In this case, Yonge uses death and disability as lessons for Rachel to understand the importance of marriage and the need to rely on a man. Everything Rachel tries to accomplish has an opposite negative consequence on her or another person's life. And connected to her punishments always is a death or a disabling. Kim Wheatly observes how "In Yonge's fiction, sudden deaths and equally unexpected recoveries from brink of death are among the chief means by which the texts reward characters (salvation of course being a cause for celebration) and both punish and reform them" (Wheatly 896). Yonge uses three interactions - the abuse and death of

Lovedy Kelland, Bessie Keith's death, and Rachel's own illness – in order to transform Rachel from an independent woman to the ideal marriageable wife, ultimately affirming the idea that Victorian society held women as inferior and in need of guidance.

Rachel begins the book as a headstrong person. Diana Pharaoh Francis goes so far as to say that "Rachel is represented as a modern feminist who is unsatisfied within the limitations of her domestic sphere. She repeatedly complains of the limits of being a single woman, though she has no inclination to marry" (Francis 93). In a righteous rant about the limitations of being a single woman, she explains her frustrations:

> I have pottered about cottages and taught at schools in the dilettante way of the young lady who thinks it her duty to be charitable; and I am told that it is my duty, and that I may be satisfied. Satisfied, when I see children cramped in soul, destroyed in body, that fine ladies may wear lace trimmings! Satisfied with the blight of the most promising buds!...And here I am, able and willing, only longing to task myself to the uttermost, yet tethered down to the merest mockery of usefulness by conventionalities. (Yonge 37-38)

She goes on to list the constraints women face as being "helpless, useless being, growing old in a ridiculous fiction of prolonged childhood" (Yonge 38). Rachel is angered that women are forced to be satisfied with a life that she feels has little purpose. Her anger in wanting to have a purpose in life other than childbearing is palpable in the early parts of the novel. Although the quote above does not address her frustrations with marriage specifically, Rachel demonstrates her dislike of being dependent, like a child, on anyone. Therefore, it is no surprise that she swears off marriage and looks for a way she can put her cleverness to good use. This is unlike *Our Mutual Friend* or *Jane Eyre* which had social taboos for a couple not being able to be together, in *The Clever Woman of the Family,* Rachel makes the decision herself to not get married. No social class difference needed. This is significant because it shows that Yonge is not focused on emphasizing the amazing if improbable unification of Alick and Rachel as seems to be the focus

of the male disability-romance plot, but rather her goal is to emphasize the lesson that women should follow men's rule. Yonge is less interested in romance and more concerned with her lesson about gender norms.

In an attempt to help women by creating a trade school, Rachel accidentally causes the death of Lovedy Kelland, a small child. In order to provide help for the women in her community, Rachel invests her family money in a trade school for girls called the Female Union for Englishwoman's Employment (F.U.E.E). The invention of F.U.E.E. was to provide young girls with knowledge in woodcutting so that they would have a profitable skill to capitalize on if they needed to look for a job. However, Rachel was way over her head and her naivete led to her giving the management of the school to the direction of Mr. Mauleverer, an evil man who ends up defrauding subscribers while permitting the girls to be abused in the school. One townswoman when she visits the school notices how "two children sat as usual in white pinafores, but it struck the lad[y] that all looked ill…. The little Alice looked very heavy and feverish" (Yonge 336-337). One child that gets especially sick is Lovedy Kelland. Rachel takes an interest in Lovedy after finding her working for a lacemaker. However, as Kim Wheatley explains "she rescues the bright girl Lovedy Kelland from the nefarious trade of lacemaking, only to make her, unknowingly, an oppressed lacemaker all over again under far worse conditions" (Wheatley 903). Lovedy is described as having "purple bruises, the red stripes, verging upon sores" all over her body and unfortunately subsequently dies of diphtheria (Yonge 340). Yonge uses Lovedy's death as a way to punish Rachel for her naivete in creating a school when she knew little of the administration and had no guidance on what to do. Janice Fiamengo argues that "Lovedy's suffering and death, which dramatically illustrate Rachel's failure to protect the children she attempts to assist, are presented as a direct consequence of Rachel's

irreligious self-reliance" (Fiamengo 82). In other words, the consequence of Rachel acting without the aid of a man is that she creates dangerous circumstances that harm the innocent people around her. Rachel's "ill-fated charitable venture" explains Livia Arndal Woods completely humbles her and transforms her "into a meek wife and mother, channeling her philanthropic energies always through the judgment of her husband" (Woods 155). At the end of the novel, Rachel even admits that "I should have been much better if I had had either father or brother to keep me in order" (Yonge 547). Overall, Yonge uses the abuse and death of Lovedy to act as a punishment for Rachel's mistakes and help reshape her character to understand the consequences of acting without the guidance of a man.

Yonge continues to punish Rachel's ambition when she contracts diphtheria like Lovedy and becomes extremely sick as a result. As in the sick bed scene of the male disability-romance plot, in which a man has a moral awakening after hitting rock bottom due to an accident allows him to be better fit to be in a romantic pairing, Rachel has a similar realization about her need for marriage that opens up her desire to get married. Rachel's sickness not only affects her physically, but it transforms her into embodying the idealized feminine traits that Yonge ascribes to, which inevitably allows her to marry Alick.

However, instead of a sickroom scene, Rachel's epiphany takes place in a trial room. Although she is not on trial for the mishaps of Mr. Mauleverer for the embezzlement at F.U.E.E. Rachel is still ridiculed by everyone around her. Initially, at the trial, Rachel is already sick and tries to keep her composure: "her resolute will had struggled hard for composure [and] cheerfulness" (Yonge 116). Unlike before when Rachel was characterized as outspoken, always knowing what to say and knew what role she had, she stumbles at the trial and is unable to control her emotions. Then she slowly deteriorates at the trial where the narrator explains how

"impassive as she looked, she heard every cough, every rustle of paper; each voice that addressed her seemed to cut her ears like a knife; and the chair that was given to her after the administration of the oath was indeed much needed" (Yonge 385). As her body gets weaker and needs to sit down, her mind is also failing and she is at a loss for words "Rachel knew she must say something; but memory utterly failed to recall any definite assurance that these debts had been discharged. Time passed, all eyes were upon her, there was a dire necessity of reply, and though perfectly conscious of the weakness and folly of her utterance, she could only falter forth, 'I thought so'" (Yonge 386). As Janice Fiamengo highlights, "the trial forces Rachel to confront her physical and mental weaknesses" (Fiamengo 251). From contracting diphtheria to her nerves shattering due to the mortification of being judged at the trial for being "accountable for all" Rachel's character begins to change from the headstrong woman she was at the start of the novel, to be more insecure and unsure of herself.

The direct connection between the revelations of the trial and Rachel's bodily weakness is seen just after her testimony, when Rachel is supposed to attend a dinner party but has waves of illness that prevent her from enjoying the night. When the conversation alluded to Lovedy's death and Rachel overheard her body immediately reacted: "mists danced before her eyes, and the very sensation that had been so studiously avoided was produced by her fainting helplessly away in her chair" (Yonge 406). Janice Fiamengo highlights just how drastic the change in Rachel is when she explains how "Rachel had despised fainting ladies, and had really hitherto been so superabundant in strength that she had no experience of the symptoms, or she might have escaped in time. But there she lay, publicly censured before the dignitaries of her county for moral folly, and entirely conquered before the rest of the world by the physical weakness she had most condemned" (Fiamengo 85). Even after the dance, Rachel is still unwell, described as

"exceedingly depressed, restless, and feverish" (Yonge 416). It is only after Alick proposes to her during this time that she begins to get better as her weakness is directly correlated to the lesson Yonge is making about the harmful effects of single womanhood. Rachel comes to the realization that she does in fact want, even need, a husband in order to function again:

> I used to think it so poor and weak to be in love, or to want any one to take care of one. I thought marriage such ordinary drudgery, and ordinary opinions so contemptible, and had such schemes for myself. And this—and this is such a break down, my blunders and their consequences have been so unspeakably dreadful, and now instead of suffering, dying—as I felt I ought—it has only made me just like other women, for I know I could not live without him, and then all the rest of it must come for his sake. (Yonge 430)

Yonge uses Rachel's illness as a way to make her physically and mentally weaker from where she started off at the beginning of the book. Rachel thus is more reliant on others to help her in her state of uneasiness and becomes slowly open to the idea of marriage. Finally, when Alick proposes, Rachel fully switches to believing that she needs a man in order to function as before without one, she was punished by the guilt of causing the death of an innocent child and getting the illness that killed the little girl.

Then, as if Lovedy's death and her illness were not traumatic enough, Rachel's friend Bessie Keith dies in a crazy accident in which her newly born baby is then given to Rachel to briefly take care of. Kim Wheatley helpfully summarizes the unusual events leading to Bessie's death explaining how "the frivolous sister-in-law Bessie… trips on a croquet hoop, promptly gives birth to a healthy baby, and, within a few hours, died, her fall over the croquet hoop having resulted in fatal injury" (Wheatley 896). This bizarre set of events is a turning point in the novel where "the infant is then temporarily nurtured by the central character, Rachel, who is recently married to Bessie's brother Alick Keith to have a child of her own. The experience forms part of the process by which Rachel is first brought low through failure of her charitable endeavors and

eventually domesticated" (Wheatley 896). Yonge uses the motherless infant as a symbol for Rachel to stimulate her maternal instincts. Newly married, Rachel has yet to fully transform her character into the obedient wife she ends up being at the end of the novel. Bessie's death allows her to bond with a child and eventually, she becomes motherlier and has her own child.

Overall, Rachel's suffering and subsequent change of character allow her to have a love story. This is because her illness makes her more recognizably female both physically and characteristically. When Bessie sees Rachel after their marriage, she notices a change in Rachel's appearance noting that "'her face is softer, and her eyes more veiled, and her chin not cocked up'" (Yonge 457). Ermine even comments that Rachel looked "better than I expected" (Yonge 427). As Fiamengo explains "Rachel's recuperation into femininity is marked on her body" (Fiamengo 87). Her recovery is also marked by her increased weariness and passivity. Rachel's abrasiveness seems to have disappeared and she is more timid. The combined physical traits that highlight her femininity with her change in demeanor allow for Rachel to be open to marriage and accept Alick's proposal. In order for Rachel's identity as a new ordinary married woman compared to the self-constituted clever woman of the family, she had to undergo serious consequences of her actions. Through facing the death of her friend, the death of an innocent child, and her own illness, Rachel is beaten down until she hits rock bottom. It is because Yonge connects Rachel's ambition without the guidance of man to her punishments that demonstrates how in order to ever find happiness, Rachel was always going to become the ideal marriageable woman. This "drastic turn to the marriage plot" Clare Walker Gore argues "is a mark of how serious a threat to familial and social harmony Yonge perceived secular feminism to be in the mid-1860s" (Gore 161). The last chapter of the novel shows how Rachel, four years later is a "thorough wife and mother" who explains how she was wrong in her earlier view, and knows the

truth of happiness is in marriage "I used to think it so poor and weak to be in love, or want anyone to take care of one. I thought marriage such ordinary drudgery, and ordinary opinions so contemptible, and had such schemes for myself'" (Yonge 430). Thus, when she changes her mind about marriage, they are able to be together.

Rachel and Alick's story may be similar to the male disability-romance plot, but it resonates differently with the readers because of gender reasons. While Rachel is getting humbled, like Eugene or Mr. Rochester, it is because Yonge is trying to make a point about the need for women to be obedient to men. Yonge is not trying to make an unlikely pair capable of being together, as there is no forbidden love or social class that prevented Alick and Rachel from being together initially; it was only Rachel's desire to not get married to anyone. And it was not a passionate display by Alick that changed Rachel's mind, but the punishments of her actions by Yonge that beat her down until she was forced to change characteristics or face even harsher consequences. The female disability-romance plot is less about the reunion of the couple and more a way for the author to craft the woman to be the ideal partner for her man. In Yonge's case, that means revealing the strict gender norms of the Victorian era that held women inferior to men and in need of guidance. Thus, Rachel's humbling is less about the romance between her and Alick and more about teaching the audience about the correct role a woman should have in society.

Ermine and Colin

Yonge's message is clear in *The Clever Woman of the Family*: women need the guidance of men or else they will face negative repercussions. However, her second narrative, which features an inter-abled couple, serves as a foil to her main argument. Ermine Williams, an invalid

who has a physical disability, marries Colin Keith, a man returning home from military service. Ermine not only redefines the typical idea of a character with a disability as she is independent and is sought out romantically, but her romance plot is completely different from Rachel's. Ermine is not humbled; rather her existing personality is what attracts Colin back to her in the first place. What allows for the seemingly contradictory nature of Yonge's entire argument—after all, Ermine is an independent woman who makes a living for herself and is seen taking care of other women and children in the book—is her disability. Although Ermine is not without male guidance, as she repeatedly refers to her brother and father for teaching her properly, she is able to exist as an adult independently because her disability makes her nonthreatening. The female disability-romance plot for Ermine and Colin still emphasizes the way that the female should be in order to best fit with her partner, but because Ermine already has a disability and a personality match for Colin, their story more so emphasizes the romance than a lesson, as seen in Rachel's case.

Ermine Williams is introduced when Fanny is looking for a governess to help tame her seven children. The reader quickly learns that along with Ermine's positive countenance, she has a disability and cannot walk. The novel explains how she was injured in a fire and that "below the knee that poor nature could not repair, and I can but just stand, and cannot walk at all" (Yonge 140). As a result, Ermine uses a wheelchair throughout the story. Unlike most invalids in Victorian literature, where a disability would be enough to ensure that a character is dependent, Ermine is seen to be very independent, as well as successful. June Sturrock highlights how "Ermine Williams is presented as a gifted writer, self-supporting financially, the assistant editor of a magazine, an effective and virtuous woman, and her sister as a first-rate governess" (Sturrock 39). Not only is Ermine defined with positive characteristics about her personality

alongside her disability, a rarity in nineteenth-century literature, but she is altogether defined as the ideal woman character according to Yonge, despite her disability. Tamara Silvia Wagner goes so far as to call her the "novel's second heroine" (Wagner 6). Ermine redefines the typical idea of a character with a disability in Victorian literature, where, although she has a disability, she still lives a fulfilling life with a career and a marriage.

What makes their love story so compelling to a modern reader is that Ermine's disability is not seen as a detriment by Colin, but is just another attribute of her character. Ermine and Colin reunite after Colin comes home from his military service abroad. While it is hinted that the two had chemistry before he left the country, Ermine and Colin did not stay in touch. Therefore, when Ermine hears that Colin is coming home, she daydreams and longs for a time before her accident when the two had the potential to be together. Ermine wanders and explains, "[she] had already been passing through a heart sickness that made the morning like an age. Her resolute will had struggled hard for composure, cheerfulness, and occupation…'Oh, Colin, Colin, are you what you were twelve years back?'" (Yonge 116). Colin did not know of Ermine's accident, so when they reunite he questions "'You don't; you have kept your sunbeam face for me with the dear brown glow I never thought to have seen again. Why did they tell me you were an invalid, Ermine?'" (Yonge 119). Normally, one would think that her new disability status would have made a Victorian character like Colin lose affection for Ermine, but this was anything but the case. He explains to her how "'[you have] been the one object and thought of my life, the only hope I have had all these years'" (Yonge 142). Sadly, the couple cannot escape all the influences of the ableist society, and Ermine feeling unworthy due to her disability rejects Colin's declaration of love and the couple is in limbo for most of the novel. Kim Wheatley argues that "Because of her invalidism, Ermine resists marriage to her faithful lover Colin Keith, partly, one

assumes, because she would be incapable of bearing children" (Wheatley 908). Luckily, this does not stop the couple, where Colin and Ermine's close proximity with one another make it inevitable that they get together at the end where they are engaged and married by the end of the novel. Ermine's worrying about having an heir is even solved by the end of the story by the fact that Bessie's child is given to Ermine and Colin to take care of after her passing where "In metaphorical terms the existence of the baby boy confirms the rightness of Ermine's marriage to Colin: presumably it can now take place because there is no longer any need for Colin to father an heir" (Wheatley 909). Ultimately, Ermine and Colin's story is one that involves disability, but it also involves true feelings for one another that allow them to be together in the end.

Disability and Compatibility

Based on Ermine and Colin's relationship, as well as Yonge's other novels that feature inter-abled couples, it should be no surprise that people with disabilities in *The Clever Woman in the Family* are featured in marriages. But interestingly it seems that the key to unlocking a relationship in Yonge's novel is for at least one person to have a disability. In fact, disability is used as a marker that a person is suitable for a relationship. Brandy Schillace notices how "Charlotte Yonge…portray[s] disabled characters as 'purified' and trauma itself as potentially sanitizing" (Schillace 587). Like Ermine who is seen as an ideal woman in Yonge's eyes, partly because in spite of her disability she still remains positive and humble, all the characters with disabilities within the novel have the quality of being morally superior and or disability helps them become morally superior. In fact, as Martha Stoddard Holmes points out "the novel's overt message is that disability draws people close and creates the interdependency that is the basis of stronger and better marriages and communities" (Holmes 33). Disability is used, not to push

away, but to bring couples together, as well as mark the people who have the greatest capacity to be a good partner in a relationship.

One example of this is Alick. Alick is a British army officer who "returned from India where he earned the Victoria Cross for a case of bravery during the siege of Delhi that left him seriously wounded and without fingers on one hand" (Fiamengo 88). This loss of ability is a marker of a good man. In the example where Rachel mistakenly lectures Alick on the meaning of heroism, using a story of a brave, self-sacrificing officer who is actually himself, his disability serves as a reminder of his bravery and his good character. Not only does it mark him as a good man, but Martha Stoddard Homes argues that "both [Rachel and Ermine] become wives and mothers, marrying cousins who have both returned permanently wounded from the siege of Delhi… and their bodily suffering gives them a feminized capacity to nurture that adds to their attractiveness" (Holmes 33). Clare Walker Gore expands this idea, noting that

> Both men [Alick and Colin] demonstrate a 'feminized capacity to nurture', and it seems to me that it is this that enables them to exert authority in an unthreatening and fundamentally feminine way, and that makes Rachel's marriage – for all that it involves her submission to Alick's authority – register above all as a return to the comfortable realm of feminine domesticity, and an escape from the nightmarish, sensational world of fraud and disgrace into which her foray into the public sphere had plunged her. (Gore 162)

Their expertise at caregiving due to their experience in the military, as well as their own disabilities, allow them to be better nurturers and better pairs for their wives. Their disability does not inhibit them from being good husbands, but actually provides them the life experience to develop the skills needed to be exemplary husbands.

What the Female Disability-Romance Teaches Us About Gender

In the nineteenth century, ideals about femininity were in flux. It is evident by the female characters in *Persuasion, The Woman in White,* and *The Clever Woman of the Family* that what it means to be an ideal woman according to these authors was greatly different. Unlike the male disability-romance plot which shows a rather uniform anxiety about the strong romantic male figure and the desire to tame this idea of masculinity by turning to the domestic, the female plot has more tension about the changing social norms, and more variability. The nineteenth century marked a time where ideas about women were changing: there were rigid social norms for upper and middle class women, but by the mid 1800s the first wave of feminism was emerging where women were embracing suffrage and others were pushing back against it.[7] Therefore, it makes sense that authors were also struggling to come up with a new ideal woman for the changing society, and try to make sense of what the ideal woman is, especially within a romantic relationship, through developing various types of characters. The range from timid Laura Fairlie to independent Ermine Williams highlights just how different the portrayal of women were in these novels. While there are similarities between characters across the texts, for example Laura Fairlie and Rachel Curtis are both examples of a more traditional timid and dependent female, the female disability-romance plot helps make sense of the diverging gender norms at the time and highlight how different authors attempted to make sense of them.

[7] A helpful article in understanding the changing gender norms in the nineteenth century is Susan Cruea's "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement" as she outlines the "challenges" and "developments" of gender norms in the wake of the women's movement (Cruea 194).

Coda

The disability-romance plot helps us understand both surprising and unsurprising truths about Victorian society. While there are many instances in which disability is portrayed in ways that confirm common stereotypes – Silas Wegg as the wooden-legged villain in *Our Mutual Friend* or Laura Fairlie as a codependent helpless child-wife in *The Woman in White*, to cite two examples from this project – the intersectionality between gender, romance, and disability reveals a kaleidoscope of possibilities for the role of disability in Victorian literature. To start, the disability-romance plot highlights the romantic capabilities of characters with disabilities, portraying them as not asexual but people able and willing to be in romantic relationships. Characters like Ermine Williams and Olive Rothesay find love despite their disabilities, while the male disability-romance plot highlights how men who are hurt and as a result take on less traditionally masculine qualities like Eugene and Mr. Rochester are able to get married at the end of their stories. Even the portrayals of disability that emphasize the challenges people faced in the nineteenth century such as the results of Laura Fairlie's trauma, the need for accommodations like Ermine's wheelchair, or Mr. Rochester's helpers due to his blindness, the disability-romance plot helps to fill out a more realistic portrayal of the experiences of people with disabilities. Finally, the warnings authors like Austen and Collins provide help to understand the difficulties women faced in Victorian society, specifically the dangers surrounding marriage.

However, I want to be cautious about coming to a purely triumphant conclusion. Although the disability-romance plot expands the notion of what people with disabilities were capable of in the nineteenth century, it is not as simple a victory as it initially seems. The problem with the disability-romance plot is that it relies on negative stereotypes of people with disabilities that ultimately perpetuate an ableist culture. It usually happens that the disability

given to a character changes their identity from their unique characteristics to one revolving around helplessness and codependency such as Eugene Wrayburn, Laura Fairlie, and Rachel Curtis. Instead of creative solutions for the romantic problems in a novel, disability is often used as a *deus ex machina* to erase complex conflicts within the text. The magical solution the disability-romance plot emphasizes relies on the assumption that people with disabilities lack autonomy and as a result, their disability becomes a character's defining trait. For example, although Eugene's accident sets in motion the circumstances that allow him to be with Lizzie, it also causes Eugene to lose all personality: his only remaining trait involves his disability and how people have to take care of him. The problem is that unlike able-bodied characters who are written to be complex and nuanced, characters with disabilities are portrayed as only having one significant defining trait, their disability. After Laura's abuse from her husband, she is only ever seen as a dependent child who needs Walter to survive. Her trauma being used to make her more available for a romantic plot leaves a lasting sexist and ableist impression of women with disabilities.

Although at times I see the disability-romance plot working to challenge harmful stereotypes for people with disabilities (a clear example is how the plot totally contradicts the idea that people with disabilities are asexual), the plot still relies on actively participating in negative stereotypes (for example, people with disabilities as dependent) in order to work against common assumptions about disability. Overall, the disability-romance plot is helpful in understanding the common pattern in Victorian literature where authors used disability as a way to allow for interesting romances. However, while the plot highlights a more nuanced perspective of disability than is often discussed surrounding nineteenth-century literature, the

modern reader must understand the still problematic reliance on harmful tropes that give the disability-romance plot its power.

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