

# **Disability: The Representation of a Non-Normative Woman's Body in Wilkie Collins's *Hide and Seek***

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**Abstract** This article explores how Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) portrays a woman with a non-normative body in his novel “Hide and Seek” (1854), from the perspective of critical disability studies. The concept of ‘non-normate’, which refers to the (non)standardized body, coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her work “Extraordinary Bodies” (1997), is used to examine Collins’s work. The novel challenges the conventional Victorian views on disability by emphasizing the independence and freedom of women with disabilities. The protagonist, Madonna, who is deaf and mute, attempts to compensate for her disability through her beauty, sexuality, and intellect. She uses diverse methods of perception, such as intuition, comprehension, and inference to overcome her disability and, thus, attempts to claim an ontological site for her existence. This paper argues that a non-normative woman’s body can embody alternative methods of perception to claim her existence, particularly when exposed to the cultural or corporeal inferiority of the hegemonic normative bodies. By challenging the dogmatic predictions that disability is synonymous with limitation and suffering, this paper offers a new perspective that views disability as a desirable state of mind and body and encourages us to appreciate the diversity and complexity of non-normative bodies.

**Keywords** Wilkie Collins; Victorian period; disability; normative body; non-normative body

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## Introduction

Wilkie Collins's novels from "Antonina" (1850) to "Blind Love" (1890), which span almost forty years, introduce intricate depictions of "modern institutional practices in the fields of medicine, psychology, and the law", narrating the "disaffected, outcast, fallen, afflicted, melancholic, and transgressive social identities" (Martin 185). In his novels, disability is a symptomatic theme. For instance, in "Poor Miss Finch" (1872), the main character's blindness plays a significant role, appearing to keep her from carrying out her own daily tasks. Similarly, in "Law and the Lady" (1875), the character Miserrimus Dexter, having a deformed body and thus, moving with a wheelchair due to lack of his lower limbs, is presented as a weird creature.

The studies carried out Collins's "Hide and Seek", are mainly concerned about identity and intricacy (Ashley 47), and illegitimate newborns as an emblem of social injustice (Cox, *Representations of Illegitimacy* 147-169; Wagner 129-145). In the literature review, there are also few studies, regarding disability in "Hide and Seek". For instance, the examination of deafness as a paradoxical display of difference (Anglin-Jaffe 53-69), the exploration of scopophilia and exposition of the anomalous body (Giovanni 149-167), the investigation of textual spectacle, particularly on silences as a positive absence of sound due to deafness (Dolich 6), the evaluation of the disabled characters as desiring subjects and/or objects of others' desire (Holmes and Mossman 493), the inquiry about how a deaf character's relation to language that disqualifies her from conventional representation and generic conventions exclude deaf characters from Victorian fiction (Esmail 991) and the descriptions of characters in relation to their physiognomy (Cox, *Reading Faces* 107), that is, "the science or knowledge of the correspondence between the external and internal man" (Lavater 19) are among few of them.

However, the literature lacks how a non-normative woman's body can embody diverse methods of perception to claim an ontological site for her existence. This paper argues that a non-normative woman's body can embody alternative methods of perception to claim her existence, particularly when exposed to the cultural or corporeal inferiority of the hegemonic normative bodies. Thus, I will discuss in this paper how non-normative woman's body can embody different experimental methods of perception such as intuition, comprehension, and inference to overcome her disability, and thus, to claim an ontological site for her existence. It also argues that disability is not solely a manifestation of limitation or pain; instead, it is a potentially desirable state of mind and body in the novel.

In doing so, in the light of disability criticism, this inquiry will be carried out

with three major questions. The first is “How was disability perceived in Victorian society?” and “How were women with disabilities treated in the Victorian period?” The second one is “How is a non-normative woman’s body portrayed in “Hide and Seek”? The last one is “How can a non-normative woman’s body embody different experimental methods of perception to claim her existence when exposed to the cultural or corporeal inferiority of the hegemonic normative bodies?” In answering these questions, this paper focuses on the representation of a non-normative woman’s body, exploring how this body can be under the strong influence of hegemonic normative bodies, even if the protagonist tries to compensate for her disability either through her beauty, sexuality, or mind. This paper argues that the protagonist with a non-normative woman’s body, despite her efforts to mitigate her disabilities either through her beauty, sexuality and mind, frequently encounter discriminatory remarks based on ableism.

### **Women with Disabilities during the Victorian Period**

During the Victorian period<sup>1</sup>, the prevailing archetype of a middle-class woman was that of *the angel in the house*, symbolizing the ideal housewife. It is imperative to acknowledge that the angel in the house was expected to be free from any disabilities. The traditional role of a housewife was limited to managing household services, instructing the servants, and caring for the children (Tosh 1-27; 53-79), while being physically able.

During the Victorian period, a woman’s social status was mostly determined by marriage, which was the chief factor in defining her societal position; as Sarah Grand highlights, “The woman question is the marriage question” (276). The denigration of women, regardless of their physical abilities, whether abled or disabled, was a common and recurring practice in Victorian society, and this was also evident in Victorian literary works. Martha Stoddard Holmes, the leading

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<sup>1</sup> During the Victorian period, disability became increasingly visible in Victorian society, as evidenced by a report from Andrew Halliday in Henry Mayhew’s “London Labour and The London Poor” (1985). According to Halliday, disability became more common, particularly on the streets of the capital in the mid nineteenth century due to the fact that either soldiers returned injured from overseas wars or people were injured in railway accidents. Furthermore, beggars, many of whom had disabilities, became more conspicuous in London streets at this time. In his work titled “Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain” (1983), Anthony S. Wohl asserts that Victorian society in Britain during that era was intensely pre-occupied with health-related issues, hygiene, and disability. Among many other factors, poor nutrition, inadequate food hygiene, a lack of cures and vaccines, limited access to medical services, and the rapid growth of industry contributed to a heightened awareness of disability issues in Victorian England.

scholar on disability in Victorian literature, explores physical disability in her work "Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture" (2007, 2010). According to her, in Victorian literature, when a disabled female character and a non-disabled female character are portrayed, the non-disabled character experiences marriage, whereas the disabled character endures suffering and is marginalized from the institution of marriage. Similarly, Ashton reveals, "[m]ost disabled women were presumed to be removed from the marriage market, not expected or desired to fulfil their womanly duties of matrimony and maternity" (34-35). In British society, the prevailing idea is that many disabled women were thought to be excluded from marriage for the simple reason that they are not physically qualified enough to carry out either their womanly responsibilities or childrearing. Therefore, "any *woman* [*italics my emphasis*] character with a disability would be ineligible for matrimony" was one of the most common issues among mainstream Victorian novelists even if these novelists believe that "the public should be accepting of and compassionate toward the disabled" (Logan 34-35).

During Collins's era, the main issues addressed by reformists, activists, and feminist campaigners were the laws concerning "the property rights of married women" and "women's legal position within marriage – including their freedom to end an unsatisfactory marriage" (Pykett 40). Unquestionably, the feminist movements or campaigns aimed at addressing the legal inequalities faced by women were a response to the societal and familial expectations that were imposed on them. Hence, it would be appropriate to argue that both symptomatic and instrumental impacts of the campaigns aimed to redefine gender norms during Collins's lifetime. This change, by the year 1850s, is highlighted by Pykett, "when a number of middle-class women had already begun their campaigns to change women's domestic roles and expand their opportunities", and including "when a growing number of working-class women had, for some years, been working outside the home in factories and workshops of various kinds," it became inevitable that "the feminized 'domestic ideal' was becoming increasingly firmly established in a range of social and cultural discourses and practices" (47), particularly during Collins's time.

As specified, social and familial roles attributed by society to women had gradually been changing through the reactions of the feminist campaigns, reformist ideas, and activists' organizations, including with the invisible power of literature, as Susan Balée elucidates. During the 1860s, women's social status and role in society began to change gradually due to the passage of various Acts aimed at improving their social status. Balée argues that "these changes were linked to the

influence of popular literature,” leading authors to start writing novels, which in turn “revolutionized public knowledge” (201). Collins was among the leading authors at that time who contributed to the change in women’s status through his portrayal of heroines in his novels. As a keen observer of the society in which he lived, Collins was aware of the subordinate position of women in society. Maria K. Bachman asserts that Collins is regarded as “one of the most prominent crusaders of women’s rights” (84). Indisputably, Collins distinguishes himself as a novelist by diverging from prevailing societal norms, particularly in his exploration of disability within the context of the Victorian period. During a time when women’s rights were widely disregarded, Collins bravely fought to demonstrate the importance of reevaluating and redefining the concepts of woman, womanhood, and disabled woman. He aimed to shift the perspective from viewing disability as an impairment to seeing it as a challenge to the senses.

In British literature, people with disabilities also appeared during the Victorian period. However, in the literary works, disability was regarded mainly as “an isolated concern, of literary or cultural significance only insofar as it may serve as a convention or an icon of affect” (Rodas 378). In other words, the portrayals of disabilities were frequently presented in the sensation novel genre in a somewhat sentimental way to teach a moral lesson to the readers of the time. According to Taylor, sensation fiction mainly focused on “central narrative features of disguise and secrecy in order to emphasize the instability of identity,” while doing this, it manipulated “cultural perceptions and codes” (13) of the society, particularly about disability during the Victorian period.

The Victorians also demonstrated a keen interest in mental disorders, specifically insanity, because of the development of psychology and psychiatry as emerging specialized disciplines. This fascination extended beyond a narrow focus on physical injuries or impairments and facilitated the inclusion of these themes in Victorian literature. Nevertheless, the portrayals of disabilities were characterized by melodrama, poetic language, and romanticized depictions aimed at evoking pathos for individuals with disabilities. Logan discusses how Victorian literature often employs melodramatic and sentimental conventions to emphasize the “affective power of disability” (22). To him, these conventions portray disability as a ‘pathetic state’ and convey the idea that “the disabled person was useless, lonely, and separated from ordinary life” (22). However, this explanation was valid for both men and women with disabilities, without making any gender and sexual discrimination, even if women with disabilities may have suffered much more than their male counterparts.

Up to this part of the paper, the first research question, particularly on how disability was perceived and how women with disabilities were treated in Victorian society, is uncovered with a focus on historical accounts. From this part onwards, the concept of non-normative bodies, including disability is to be uncovered.

### **Bodies: (Non)-normative Bodies and Disability**

The term body can be taken as a physical structure of human. Or more, “The body is not, nor can it ever be, an object; nor is it just a positing consciousness” (Warmack 107) or else, a body is a holistic being, that is, “an indivisible possession” whose positions are the signals of a “body schema that envelops them” (Merleau-Ponty 100-101), or rather a thing situated in an “osmosis between sexuality and existence” (Merleau-Ponty 172). Besides, a body is not an assortment of different body parts but an entanglement of interactions with intra or extra agents. Moreover, a lived body is a body having “intercorporeal relations between others and things” (Stawarska 101), or more precisely, it is an “originary acquisition of the natural or physical world” (Warmack 108). Furthermore, prepersonal body is “not a passive or statistic posture, as if the body were a blank slate or a material” since “it has a sensory history, constituted from previous encounters with the world and others” (Al-Saji 55). On the other hand, the “captured body” is the body that is “made flesh: penetrated, flayed, seared, whipped, tortured by instruments masterfully wielded by seemingly invisible hands” (Warmack 110), the exemplars of which can be seen in (post)colonial novels. As the literature indicates, the body’s processing system is highly complex, with intricate intra and extra entanglements. The corporeal existence of the body not only embodies the present but also the past data, making it a mesmerizing and multidimensional system.

In critical disability studies, the term “normate” is coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson at the very outset of her seminal work “Extraordinary Bodies” (1997). As she puts it, the normate “designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings” since normate is “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). In other words, the normate is the constructed identity of individuals who, through their physical characteristics and cultural background, can assume positions of authority and wield the power that comes with it. Additionally, philosophers, scholars, and specialists across the field of critical disability studies agree that any “exclusions and injustices that situated and continue to situate the non-normate as second-class citizens or even subhuman” (Reynolds 247) are

unacceptable.

By taking the standpoints of Garland-Thomson and expanding them upon three aspects, Joel Micheal Reynolds reveals first, “as a question of attribution and narrative, disability is constituted by and through the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in general and our ‘bodominds’ [...]” (244), second, “disability is a question of form, mode, and matter, all of which are cast as deviant - not just malformed or aberrant, but a deviation, the loss or absence of way and of being [...]” (244), third, “disability cannot be thought outside of the triumvirate of the normal, natural, and normative,” additionally, “these terms form an intricate tapestry of ideas and assumptions that underwrite common-sense notions of how things ought to be. That which is normal is that which is typical” (244).

Concisely, Reynolds’s insightful expansion of Garland-Thomson’s viewpoints reveals that disability is not just a medical condition, but a social construct. It is shaped by the stories we tell ourselves about our body and mind, and how society perceives and labels them. Disability is not just a deviation from the norm, but a loss of way and being. Therefore, disability cannot be thought outside of the triumvirate of the normal, natural, and normative. These concepts underwrite our common-sense notions of how things ought to be and what is considered typical, as indicated, “That which is typical is natural, regular, common, and even universal” (244), excluding disability from all these concepts.

### **The Representation of a Non-normative Woman’s Body in “Hide and Seek”**

Martin’s study reveals that Charles Dickens, referring to “Hide and Seek”, writes, “I think it far away the cleverest novel I have ever seen written by a new hand” (186). “Hide and Seek” is a captivating novel, renowned for its sensational storytelling and the pivotal role played by its intrusive and omniscient narrator in “detecting a family secret” (Griffin 6). The narrator’s perspective provides a unique and intimate insight into the characters’ motivations and emotions, making the story even more engaging.

“Hide and Seek,” shedding light on the complexities and nuances of disability and ableism, depicts a compelling portrayal of the disparities between Madonna, who has a non-normative body, and those with the normative bodies. Through Madonna, an orphaned young woman who is deaf and mute, the novel highlights the cognitive, affective, and psychological experiences that differ between the characters with normative and non-normative bodies. Madonna is depicted as a remarkable character, a visually striking and picturesque figure who embodies exceptionalism in every aspect. Her real name and parentage are kept a mystery throughout the story,

further adding to the intrigue and captivating nature of the novel.

The novel introduces the protagonist, Madonna, who is in her early twenties and lives with Valentine Blyth, an unsuccessful painter. The story then goes back thirteen years to 1838, revealing how Madonna meets Valentine at the age of ten. Madonna is an orphan and is forced by Mr. Jubber, a tyrannical circus director, to perform in circus acts. Tragically, she falls off a horse, resulting in the loss of her ability to hear and speak. Mr. Jubber exploits her disability by featuring her in various performances for the audience, which is tantamount to the exploitation of a deaf child in circus acts. In her work "Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret" (1979), Leslie Fiedler explores the exploitation of disabled individuals in various settings. She delves into the history of society's fascination with non-normative human bodies and how this has led to the exploitation of these bodies for financial gain. Similarly, Madonna's experiences highlight the vulnerability of those with non-normative bodies to capital exploitation. It is important to acknowledge that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, individuals with disabilities were frequently displayed as exhibits in "human zoos and freak shows" in both the United Kingdom and the United States (Půtová 92). These displays focused primarily on physical differences and people with disabilities.

During her childhood, Madonna obeys the directives given to her by Mr. Jubber, despite being aware of his authoritarian nature and exploitative tendencies. Due to her young age, Madonna is expected to exhibit submission, and as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that she is being objectified because of the predetermined gender roles of the society. Nancy F. Cott expresses her thoughts as such, "Women had learned that gender prescribed their talents, needs, outlooks, inclinations; their best chance to escape their stated inferiority in the world of men was on a raft of gender 'difference'" (190). Broadly speaking, the women adopting the predetermined gender roles perceive that their most viable opportunities to surmount their perceived inferiority in a male-dominated society was to embrace their gender distinctions. This is what Madonna does at the outset of the story.

Jubber's Circus, where Madonna works, announces Madonna as the "THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD" (Collins 55), emphasizing "Mr. Jubber, as proprietor of the renowned Circus, has the honour of informing the nobility, gentry, and public, that the above wonderful Deaf and Dumb Female Child will appear between the first and second parts of the evening's performances" (Collins 56). That the circus's announcement of the display of a deaf and mute child is an extraordinary event that is eagerly anticipated by the nobility, gentry, and public undeniably indicates the use of ableist language. Furthermore, Mr. Jubber's taking



great pride in sharing this news and inviting everyone to witness the child's performance can also be regarded as discrimination against people with physical disabilities. This example shows that how hegemonic normative body can abuse a non-normative woman's body.

The use of ableist language is evident in Mr. Jubber's announcements and advertisements, as well as in his exploitation of a young girl based on his hegemonic power. In this quote, Mr. Jubber can be taken seen as a normate because, as Reynolds explains, "[a]s a hegemonic phantasm, the normate offers an endless supply of normative measures against which non-normate bodies will prove to be worth less or even worthless" (245). In the circus, the spectators "never tired of scrawling questions, of saying 'poor little thing!' and of kissing her whenever they could get the opportunity, while she slowly went round the circus. 'Deaf and dumb! ah, dear, dear, deaf and dumb!' was the general murmur of sympathy which greeted her from each new group, as she advanced [...]" (Collins 60). Mr. Jubber's announcement, while it may appear to present Madonna's non-normative body as a valuable object for the curious audience, carries a degrading undertone towards a non-normative woman's body in its deeper meaning. Undoubtedly, his way of exploiting a young girl in a circus exhibition to make money signifies humiliation of a non-normative body by the hegemonic normative bodies.

In the remaining chapters of the novel, Madonna's situation undergoes a significant change when her fate becomes intertwined with a man named Valentine Blyth. At the start of the story, it is revealed that Valentine adopted Madonna because he and Lavinia had always longed for a child. Valentine, as a loving and devoted husband, has always cared for his disabled wife due to her spinal condition for many years. Throughout the novel, Valentine and Lavinia show Madonna nothing but kindness and compassion, treating her as their own. The novel portrays how Valentine has a particular motive of having the girl as a companion for himself and his bedridden wife. For instance, even in the face of challenges, Valentine remains affectionate and attentive to Lavinia, who "had the heart to bear all burdens patiently; and could find sources of happiness for herself, where others could discover nothing but causes for grief" (Collins 53). Just like Lavinia, Madonna finds herself in a similar state of mind after undergoing a medical examination and accepting her situation, as she understands the doctor's instructions for Valentine: "you [Valentine] must set her [Madonna] an example of cheerfulness, and keep up her spirits – that's all that can be done for her now" and "hearing is completely gone; the experiment with my watch proves it," and the doctor adds that "The shock of that fall has, I believe, paralyzed the auditory nerve in her" (Collins 97).

However, despite this explanation, the doctor still feels the need to comment on Madonna's appearance, calling her "the prettiest little girl" he's ever seen (Collins 96). This suggests that the doctor's emotional reaction to Madonna's deafness may be influenced by his reaction to her beauty. But in its deeper meaning, it includes the reflection of hegemonic power.

The narrator avoids depicting Madonna as a victim, particularly after Valentine rescues her from Mr. Jubber. Madonna's portrayal in the story presents her as similar to the abled, emphasizing that disability does not define a person's worth. The narrator's technique of evoking sympathy for Madonna without portraying her as weak is commendable and keeps the readers engaged in the story: "[i]t's so hard to remember she's deaf and dumb, when one sees her sitting there looking so pretty and happy" (Collins 77).

Madonna transforms from a naive child to a captivating woman in the novel. Collins intrepidly challenges traditional literary norms by highlighting Madonna's evolving sexual appeal and asserting that disability does not preclude physical attractiveness in women. Despite her hearing loss, Madonna demonstrates her keen intellect and resourcefulness, particularly in navigating ableist language and uncomfortable situations. Though the normative bodies are considered as "the ultimate ability exemplar, the exemplarity of which is shaped by and anchored in ableist assumptions that tell us how bodies are and should be" (Reynolds 245), Madonna, having a non-normative body, compensates her disability through her mind, practicality and independence as exemplified in the following quote:

She always betrayed her pleasure or uneasiness in the society of others with the most diverting candor-showing the extremest anxiety to conciliate and attract those whom she liked; running away and hiding herself like a child, from those whom she disliked. There were some unhappy people, in this latter class, whom no persuasion could ever induce her to see a second time. (Collins 119)

Concerning this quotation, Garland's explanation suggests that "the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies" are not determined "by physical laws" but by "social relationships" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 7). To her, these relationships often result in one group being legitimized through physical characteristics, while others are systematically oppressed through cultural or corporeal inferiority. This understanding is crucial in explaining the complexity of Madonna's reactions towards someone she both loves and hates. By recognizing the social construct of physical characteristics, one can dismantle the oppressive structures that lead to

such complicated emotions.

Madonna's cognitive skills, such as literacy, logical reasoning, and critical thinking, play a critical role in perceiving, analysing and synthesizing events as a powerful woman who uses sign language to compensate for her deafness while showcasing her unique thoughts and sharp intellect. Despite the belief fostered by evolutionary theory that sign languages are inferior to spoken languages and only suitable for "savages and not for civilized human beings" (Baynton 93), Collins challenges us to recognize the importance of communication methods for people with disabilities. People who are deaf or hard of hearing may experience higher levels of anxiety in social situations since "[a]bility expectations are culled not just from one's proprioceptive-kinaesthetic experience of one's body, but from one's environment and social milieu" (Reynolds 245), according to the critical disability studies. For example, Madonna's voice takes on a more masculine quality after the horse accident, leaving her feeling uneasy. However, she refuses to let this prevent her from communicating with others and instead relies on the finger alphabet or written signs. Despite her deafness, she strives to compensate with beauty and intellect, and is often presented as a woman "beatified by speechlessness" or "the speechless of the angelic type of mid-century heroine" (Gitter 189). Nevertheless, Madonna's beauty is often emphasized over her disability, leading readers to understand her struggles and not to perceive her solely as a romantic heroine or a victim.

It was common in the past for disabled women to be viewed as asexual, and as a result, they were frequently excluded from romantic and marital relationships. This trend continued into not only in the nineteenth but also in the twentieth century and, presumably, in the twenty-first century may exist as well. However, the novel presents a unique relationship between Madonna, a disabled woman, and Zack, a physically fit and able-bodied man. Although it may seem unconventional, "a putative romance narrative is established around the couple" (Flint 159). Madonna sees her body as a normative body, and is incredibly social and cheerful, despite her disability. She relies on her intellect. This relationship challenges the norm of a normative body with a non-normative body.

In the novel, Madonna is depicted as a charming and selfless woman who adapts well to social situations. Despite her almost imperceptible disability, she has improved her observation and analysis skills to such a remarkable extent that she can often correctly guess the general tone of a conversation by closely observing the minute variations in the speakers' expressions and gestures, paying particular attention to their lips, as quoted in the following lines. Madonna manages:

to sharpen her faculties of observation and her powers of analysis to such a remarkable degree, that she often guessed the general tenor of a conversation quite correctly, merely by watching the minute varieties of expression and gesture in the persons speaking – fixing her attention always with especial intencness on the changeful and rapid motions of their lips. (Collins 120)

Moreover, she can also discern the essence of a conversation without hearing the actual words and is able to judge a stranger's character by observing his/her "manner, expression, and play of features at a first interview" (Collins 119). In other words, her non-normative body embodies alternative methods of perception such as intuition, comprehension, and inference for the sake of creating an ontological site for her being. She emphatically prefers to acknowledge her disability as a unique and defining characteristic, setting her apart from normative bodies. Because she believes this disability makes herself distinctive among normative bodies, for whom such a norm of being is undefinable. For instance, according to Zack, "She's been so from a child. Some accident; a fall, I believe. But it don't affect her spirits a bit. She's as happy as the day is long – that's one comfort" (Collins 253). Unquestionably, Madonna's spirit and manner show that disability may not be synonymous with limitation and suffering. She continually searches for an ontological site to claim her existence throughout the novel.

Madonna endures the intolerant language and behavior of characters who possess normative bodies. The idea of "ableism as the assumption that the 'normal' or 'typical' body is better than the abnormal body because it is normal" (Reynolds 245) is evident in the characters of Zack and Mat. In their conversations, their use of ableist language is clearly shown: "I suppose you saw the poor dear little soul is deaf and dumb," and including, "Deaf and dumb! So like her, it was a'most as awful as seeing the dead come to life again. [...] Mary's - poor creature! poor creature!" (Collins 253). These discriminatory remarks reveal degradation of a non-normative body by the hegemonic normative bodies.

It is vital to comprehend the narrator's stance on marriage to grasp why Madonna is unequivocally prohibited from marrying Zack in the novel's conclusion. Despite some critics viewing the novel as more of a mystery than a love story, the emphasis on Madonna's lineage and illegitimacy, including her adoption, is evident throughout the novel. This is highlighted in the narrator's decision to forbid Madonna from marrying Zack:

“You’ve fallen in love with Madonna at first sight!”

“Damn your laughing! Tell me who she is.”

“Tell you who she is? That’s exactly what I can’t do.”

“Why not? What do you mean? Does she belong to painter-man?”

“Oh, fie, Mat! You mustn’t talk of a young lady belonging to anybody, as if she was a piece of furniture, or money in the Three per Cents, or something of that sort.” (Collins 252)

In the end, the true identity of Madonna’s mother is revealed, and a surprising twist reveals that Zack is actually her half-brother. “Hide and Seek” doesn’t suggest that Madonna’s disability would prevent her from getting married. In fact, the focus is on her mysterious and unknown lineage, as narrated in this quote: “He [Valentine] adopted her, as they call it, years ago, when she was a child. But who she is, or where he picked her up, or what is her name, Blyth never has told anybody, and never will. She’s the dearest, kindest, prettiest little soul that ever lived; and that’s all I know about her” (Collins 252). This shows that the narrator doesn’t display Madonna as a woman with a disability cannot get married. However, the emphasis is on her lineage. For instance, Lavinia Blyth, who has also a non-normative body, remains married until the end of the novel. Additionally, this indicates Collins’s liberal approach to marriage for women with non-normative bodies.

“Hide and Seek” paints an inspiring picture of Madonna, demonstrating how a woman with a non-normative body can overcome obstacles and lead a fulfilling life. Collins challenges the common misconception that being disabled is synonymous with despondency. He also highlights the negative impact of surgeries and, further suggests that surgeries to rehabilitate disabled individuals can be a heavy burden on them. According to Logan, “Collins refuses to present the idea that Madonna would have a much better life hearing and speaking. Instead, *Hide and Seek* suggests that Madonna’s movement toward maturity involves her accepting—even embracing—her disability” (70). In other words, Madonna is portrayed as a woman whose mental capacity, physical beauty, and spiritual psychology are emphasized more than her disability. Indeed, her impairment is barely noticeable in the story. As Siebers suggests, “disability” should be reinterpreted “as a form of human variation” (25), then, Madonna’s usual situation can also be considered as a form of human variation, rather than a distinction.

In Collins’s novel, deafness is not portrayed as a burden but rather a condition that enhances Madonna’s other senses. Collins argues that disability is a social construct that is perpetuated by harmful beliefs such as individualism and eugenics.

And disability is “the invisible mechanism” supported by normative bodies, which encompasses “buttressing forces from toxic individualism to social eugenics” (Reynolds 244). To overcome these assumptions, Collins suggests moving towards an inclusive perspective on disability. For instance, as Madonna becomes adept at interpreting body language and nonverbal communication, her other senses become sharper, demonstrating the potential for growth and adaptation, as indicated in the following quote:

All beautiful sights, and particularly the exquisite combinations that Nature presents, filled her with an artless rapture, which it affected the most unimpressible people to witness. Trees were beyond all other objects the greatest luxuries that her eyes could enjoy. She would sit for hours, on fresh summer evenings, watching the mere waving of the leaves; her face flushed, her whole nervous organization trembling with the sensations of deep and perfect happiness which that simple sight imparted to her. (Collins 120)

Madonna's disability cannot be seen as a limitation or a source of pain. Instead, it can be viewed as a serenity of both mind and body that could be desirable. Additionally, her happiness radiates an atmosphere of reconciliation and tranquillity. However, the normative bodies tend to believe that the bodies that do not conform to the norms, namely the non-normative bodies, are less valuable. Or else, the experienced sites of the non-normative bodies may be undefinable for the normative bodies. This stance can stem from hegemonic power, ideology, or phantasm that prevent those with the normative bodies from understanding those with non-normative bodies. Alternatively, it may be because the normative bodies do not experience the identical emotions that the non-normative bodies practice due to their disabilities. Consequently, non-normative bodies, including Madonna, are often treated as objects rather than subjects that can be exploited for cultural gain or subjected to discriminatory statements based on their disabilities. The novel suggests that normative bodies tend to undervalue non-normative bodies and that disabled ones are often exploited or subjected to ableist comments. However, Madonna compensates for her disability through her beauty, intellect, and sexuality. Despite facing ableist treatments and assumptions, she overcomes them with grace and resilience.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper examines the representation of a non-normative woman's

body in “Hide and Seek” by Wilkie Collins. It argues that a non-normative woman body can embody different experimental methods of perceptions, such as intuition, comprehension, inference, liberating the body from the limitations of the dogmatic predictions arising from the automatization of hearing.

By examining the relationships between the normative and non-normative bodies through the lens of critical disability studies, this paper concludes that the non-normative body can embody alternative methods of perception to claim her existence, particularly when exposed to the cultural or corporeal inferiority of the hegemonic normative bodies. By interweaving the historical accounts on disability and woman question in the Victorian society, this paper firstly, attempts to unveil how women with disabilities were treated; secondly, it examines the portrayal of a non-normative woman’s body and lastly, it uncovers the motivations behind embodying different methods of perception for a non-normative body. Moreover, in this paper, whereas the protagonist Madonna, is under the strong influence of hegemonic normative bodies, she determinately tries to create an ontological site for her own existence. To do that, she tries to compensate for her disability through her beauty, sexuality, and mind. Thus, this paper argues that disability is not seen as a limitation or pain, rather it can be a desirable state of mind and body. For instance, Garland Thomson reveals what a disabled body, indeed, demands is “a narrative, requires an apologia that accounts for its difference from unexceptional bodies” (*Staring Back* 334). By indicating the non-normative bodies’ claim for a narrative that accounts for its divergence from the unexceptional bodies, Garland Thomson unquestionably emphasizes that the non-normative bodies attempt to create an ontological site for their existence, beginning from structuring the narratives. Since such narratives result from the cultural and corporeal inferiority of the non-normative bodies by the hegemonic normative bodies, a well-crafted apologia can be meaningful for the non-normative bodies and ensure that it is not overlooked or marginalized in society. Similarly, Flint justifies Collins’s humanistic approach towards disability, stating that: “These connections, tying in able-bodied and disabled alike, allow us to see the differently-abled not so much as Others, but as placed on a human continuum of affective relationships [...]” (164). Put it differently, encompassing both those with normative and non-normative bodies facilitate a paradigm shift in perceiving the latter as integral components of a human continuum of affective relationships, rather than as marginalized Others.

In conclusion, “Hide and Seek” challenges socio-cultural assumptions and expectations about disability during the Victorian period and narrates a quest for claiming an ontological site for a non-normative woman’s body. Although

the protagonist, Madonna, is exposed to the cultural or corporeal inferiority of the hegemonic normative bodies using ableist language, she compensates for her disability through her beauty, sexuality, and mind, and, thus, she creates an ontological site for her existence. Thus, disability can be seen a potentially desirable state of mind and body. We can create a more inclusive and equitable society for all by accepting differences and celebrating diversity.

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