

# Victorian Representations of Mental Illness and Disability for Inclusive Pedagogy, Mental Health Literacy, and Disability Awareness

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## ABSTRACT:

Victorian fiction provides a lens through which to understand the cultural representation, social regulation and pedagogical reinterpretation of mental illness and disability. It examines the representation of female madness, female depression, female hallucination, confinement in the asylum, blindness, epilepsy, and embodied marginality in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and *Poor Miss Finch*. It examines these novels qualitatively through the lens of the construction of mental and bodily difference through stigma, vulnerability, institutional control, medical-legal authority and narrative silence. The analysis reveals that Victorian fiction does not provide a picture of mental illness and disability as personal problems but as problems that are socially constructed through cultural judgement, domestic control, legal influence and social marginalisation. Marginalised characters like Bertha Mason, Lucy Snowe, Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie, Lucilla Finch and Oscar Dubourg show how fear, pity, confinement, misrecognition and silencing affect how they are treated. The study also suggests that such literary portrayals can be used as a means to inclusive pedagogy if done with a historical awareness and ethical concern. While some stereotypes and problematic assumptions are found in Victorian texts, these can be used as positive learning experiences in the classroom to call into question stigma, build empathy, encourage respectful dialogue and enhance mental health literacy. It integrates Victorian literary analysis with current issues in special education, thus showing that literature might make an impact on disability awareness and on more inclusive educational practices.

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## 1. Introduction

Victorian fiction offers a literary arena in which to explore the nature of mental illness and mental disability in the Victorian era. The three novels

chosen, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *Poor Miss Finch*, represent the margins and madness of women, and the distress

and blindness, expulsion from asylum and epilepsy of their characters, all examined and judged by medical, legal, and familial structures. These representations are useful in the study of literature and for pedagogical arguments as they show the ways in which stigma is created, difference is misinterpreted, and people are marginalized.

The article bridges the fields of Victorian literary studies, inclusive education, mental health literacy and disability awareness. Inclusive education is seen as an ethical, pedagogical approach and not as a placement policy. It necessitates teachers identifying barriers, meeting diversity and establishing an environment for participation. Ainscow (2020) emphasises participation barriers must be minimised for inclusion and equity to be achieved. Leijen et al. (2021) also talk about the partial inclusion and real inclusion. In this context, literature can be used as a resource to explore the issues of exclusion and judgement in terms of a narrative experience.

Victorian fiction has been appropriate since it frequently views mental illness and disability as both physical and social disorders. But disability in the nineteenth-century novel was often used to organize action, opposition, and development of characters more often than as a mere adornment of narrative, as Gore (2019) demonstrates. According to Hingston (2019), Victorian narratives are the ways in which illness and disability became visible, and socially significant. These understandings are crucial because the novels chosen illustrate how social systems readjust, enclose, marginalize and punish the other who are not in keeping with dominant norms.

In Brontë's works, mental suffering is linked to gender, loneliness and striving for individual identity. Bertha Mason, in *Jane Eyre*, embodies the madness of women, the Gothic sense of confinement, the colonial and/or racial isolation, and Jane's psychological strength a model of resistance. In the novel, the suffering of a few, the voice of a few and the body of a few are

recognized, heard, and locked up. Lucy Snowe is depressed, lonely, hallucinating, and the narration in *Villette* is unreliable and has psychological ambiguity, which results in an inner mental turmoil and agony. Villette's portrayal of female "madness" and isolation and emotional pain were explored by Bury (2021). Representations can help mental health literacy in that they can prompt students to foster an awareness of distress as something that is historically and socially constructed rather than a defect.

Collins's fiction extrapolates from this fear of mental illness and disability and ties it to the state power of institutions. Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie are linked in *The Woman in White* with: wrongful asylum confinement, medical authority, legal manipulation and female vulnerability. The experiences show how the identities and credibility of women could be regulated by institutions which claimed to keep order and reason. The gendered and/or disabled perspective is useful with the interpretation of Crape (2023) on *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*, as they challenge the normative ideas of ability and social value in relation to time. Poor Miss Finch explores sensations of blindness, neurological differences, and social miscommunication through Lucilla Finch's blindness and Oscar Dubourg's epilepsy. As demonstrated by Brophy (2019), there are shifting cultural connotations of authenticity, fear and uncertainty associated with epilepsy for Poor Miss Finch.

These texts are more clearly understood when read in conjunction with the current debates on disability and inclusive pedagogy. For Felder (2021), disability is particularly important in education as it calls into question the existing views on diversity, recognition and participation within the process of schooling. Almeqdad et al. (2023) demonstrate the positive effects of universal design for learning on access and engagement for a variety of learners. As such, the study of Victorian texts can be used to enable students to see stereotypes and build empathy

and respectful language and disability rights awareness. They can also contribute to the discussion of the role of social attitudes in the lives of people with mental health issues.

It is also crucial to the purpose of the article to be mentally health literate. Crockett et al. (2025) demonstrate that educational programs do have the ability to decrease mental health stigma among adolescents. Literary study can be a part of this goal by providing a story line where the student(s) explore the themes of fear, misrecognition, confinement, silence and resilience. But, this type of teaching must not fall into romanticization of suffering and Victorian prejudices. Instead, the classroom can help question stigma, develop dignity and ethical awareness using these novels. This article aims to analyse the depiction of madness, depression, confinement in the asylum, blindness, epilepsy and neurological differences in selected Victorian novels, as well as to examine the Victorian anxieties regarding gender, medicine, law, normalcy and social exclusion that emerge in these works, and to make them pedagogically relevant to inclusive education, mental health literacy and disability awareness.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

This article adopted a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine selected Victorian representations of mental illness, disability, confinement, and embodied marginality. The study is interpretive in nature and focuses on how literary texts construct meanings around psychological distress, bodily difference, gendered vulnerability, institutional authority, and social exclusion. Through close reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *Poor Miss Finch*, the analysis explores how Victorian fiction represents mental illness and disability as social, cultural, gendered, and institutional experiences. The study also connects these literary representations with inclusive education, mental health literacy, and disability awareness.

### 2.2 Selection of Primary Texts

Some of the main texts chosen for this article include the novels of Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*, *Villette*), and Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*, *Poor Miss Finch*). The novels have been chosen because they are representative of a range of interconnected aspects related to mental illness and disability found in Victorian novels. Both Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre embody lines of female madness, of being contained in the Gothic setting, of being excluded from the mainstream of colonial society, and of being resilient in the face of psychological stress. Lucy Snowe is a character who delves into the concepts of depression, isolation, hallucination, unreliable narration, psychological ambiguity, and more through *Villette*. Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie are both figures of the *Woman in White* relating to the issues of wrongful asylum confinement, medical-legal power and female vulnerability. Blindness, epilepsy, neurological difference, and embodied marginality occur as poor Miss Finch foregrounds these in *Lucilla Finch* and *Oscar Dubourg*. All of these texts can serve as a good foundation for studying mental and physical difference in larger frameworks of stigma, control and exclusion in Victorian fiction.

### 2.3 Analytical Framework

Three interlinked frameworks, namely, studies of Victorian literature, disability studies and inclusive education are used to guide the analysis. An analysis of the selected novels in the context of Victorian literature helps to position them within the nineteenth-century issues of gender, illness, morality, domestic power, medical control, legal control, and social normalcy. Disability studies offers a critical lens for analyses of disabled and mentally distressed characters in narrative as they are represented, interpreted, marginalized or silenced. For this study, it is helpful to reference Gore (2019) and Hingston (2019), who have established that disability and illness became an integral part of plot, characterisation and social significance in nineteenth-century fiction. The literary analysis

was integrated into the inclusive education framework, as well as the issues of inclusion in the classroom, the knowledge about mental health, about the people with disabilities, empathy, and stigma reduction issues in the contemporary time.

#### 2.4 Focus of Textual Analysis

The contextual analysis is mainly based on the selected characters and situations of the story that indicate mental illness, disability, imprisonment or social out-casting. The study looks at the positioning of Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie, Lucilla Finch and Oscar Dubourg in their social and institutional contexts. The aspect of language, imagery, silence, confinement, bodily difference, psychological ambiguity, misrecognition, and narrative control were all addressed. The article also examined the impact of the family, the law, the doctor, the male norm and social norms on the attitude towards the mentally ill and disabled characters. The selection of the novels enabled the study to reveal the pattern of stigma, exclusion, vulnerability, resilience and institutional control among the stories.

#### 2.5 Relevance to Inclusive Education and Disability Awareness

Pedagogical reading of the selected novels is also included in the methodology. This resulted in the texts being studied not just as literature, but as a source of educational materials which could contribute to inclusive education, mental health literacy and disability awareness. Ainscow (2020) emphasizes the need to address barriers to participation in inclusive education and Almeqdad et al. (2023) stress the importance of flexible and accessible pedagogical strategies. This lens guides the study to investigate how Victorian fiction can be used to teach stigma and exclusion, institutional injustice, empathy, respectful language and critical awareness of mental health and disability. Thus, a combination of close literary analysis and educational interpretation is used to demonstrate the ways in

which Victorian texts could be part of the classroom discourse in the present day.

### 3. Analysis: Representations of Mental Illness, Disability, and Marginality in Victorian Fiction

#### 3.1 Female Madness, Gothic Confinement, and Psychological Resilience in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's depiction of mental illness in *Jane Eyre* is defined by Gothic otherness, domestic confinement and surreptitious madness: Bertha Mason is a character who embodies mental illness. Bertha is denied a voice of her own through Rochester's, and is stuck in the attic of Thornfield. Her state of illness is not just a state of psychological imbalance but rather a state of social and patriarchal construction, dominated by marriage, possession, colonialism, and house. The attic is a symbolic place where the difference of women is concealed instead of comprehended. By contrast, Jane's emotional trauma is symbolised by her endurance, introspection and moral resistance. She is rejected, lonely, fearful and humiliated, but she maintains her self-respect and moral independence. Such a reading is upheld by Crape (2023), who demonstrates a displacement of the normal to the capacity, temporality and social worth of *Jane Eyre*. So, the novel offers a form of unspeakable madness, and psychological strength.

#### 3.2 Depression, Isolation, and Psychological Ambiguity in *Villette*

The setting of *Villette* is a shift from visible bonds to internal anguish for Brontë. Loneliness, depression, hallucination, emotional repression and narrative uncertainty are Lucy Snowe's ways of expressing her distress. Bertha suffers from physical confinement, whilst Lucy suffers from psychological and social confinement (displacement, silence, emotional isolation). She is a controlled and unreliable narrator, often masking her pain instead of revealing it. This makes her mental anguish undecipherable and hard to classify. Bury (2021) suggests that *Villette* is a representation of female madness, as it is

experienced in isolation and through suffering, and that this account would help to account for Lucy's madness as a social and personal experience. In the novel, the novel's significance is mental health literacy and the reader appreciates the hidden distress, the restricted suffering and the challenge of saying the word for mental pain.

### **3.3 Wrongful Asylum Confinement and Medical-Legal Power in *The Woman in White***

*The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins is a novel about mental illness, in the form of institutional abuse and the controlling of women's identities. Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie expose how medical and legal power has the potential to restrict, constitute and stifle powerless women. The marginality and nervousness of Anne makes her socially suspect, and the situation of Laura, who is locked up in an asylum, under the auspices of the father, shows how identity can be erased through the manipulation of the father. The novel reveals the perils of institutions which profess to serve reason but are implemented by power, darkness and legal force. Logan (2018) is helpful here as sensation fiction often portrays disability, deviance, secrecy and social fear by the threat of institutionalization. Collins reveals that asylum confinement is not simply a medical issue, but a way to expel women when they become a hindrance to social and legal acceptance.

### **3.4 Blindness, Epilepsy, and Embodied Marginality in *Poor Miss Finch***

*Poor Miss Finch* is one of the most overtly Victorian attempts to deal with disability and neurological difference. Lucilla Finch is the blind black girl, and her blindness is a disrupter to the traditions of knowledge, beauty, independence and identity that are dependent on sight. Her blindness does not render her passive, it is a window to how others perceive disability in the context of pity, control, curiosity and anxiety. Epilepsy is yet another kind of embodied marginality, one that is beset by fear, uncertainty and social misunderstanding as they have been

experienced by Oscar Dubourg. Brophy (2019) suggests that the connotations of authenticity and bodily difference are shifting and unstable with respect to epilepsy in *Poor Miss Finch*. In Collins's fiction, Mangham (2024) also links epilepsy and feelings of sensation and story. The novel demonstrates that disability is not just a physical state, it is also a social one which is given meaning, judged and treated in varying ways through Lucilla and Oscar.

### **3.5 Comparative Patterns of Stigma, Confinement, and Social Exclusion in Victorian Fiction**

In the chosen novels, mental illness and/or disability are negotiated through the reiteration of stigmatisation, confinement, misrecognition and social exclusion. Bertha is trapped in the inside of the domestic Gothic, Lucy is isolated in the inside of psychological torment, Laura is erased for the power of the asylum, and Lucilla and Oscar are sensory and neurological differences. These characters illustrate how Victorian society was sometimes frightened by, secretive about, pitied, treated as a medical problem, or excluded mental and bodily differences. As Gore (2019) and Hingston (2019) discussed before, sickness and disability are a key component of narrative meaning in the nineteenth century, and this is reflected in these novels. Concurrently, their significance goes beyond the limits of the literary field. Ma et al. (2023) demonstrate that engagement in education can help to enhance mental health literacy and reduce mental health stigma. Thus, these Victorian texts might be used as a critical resource to build empathy, disability awareness, and better understandings of mental health, and of embodied difference.

## **4. Discussion**

The analysis provides a critical pedagogical means to explore the history of the construction of mental illness, disability and marginality in Victorian fiction. The chosen novels do not depict psychological suffering and disability as entirely personal phenomena, but instead document the role of the social institutions in the



construction of exclusion, as well as that of gender norms, medical and legal power and family relations. This is important for inclusive education as the current concept of inclusion is not only physical, it does not only mean to be in the classroom. It also needs to eliminate barriers of participation and dignity, including attitudinal, curricular, linguistic and institutional barriers. Starting with the current scholarship, it is argued that inclusive education needs to focus on structural and pedagogical challenges, and not on the individual limitation of the learner, who has a disability (Sharma et al., 2019; Van Mieghem et al., 2020).

The images of Bertha Mason, Lucy Snowe, Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie, Lucilla Finch and Oscar Dubourg illustrate the Victorian culture's reaction to mental and physical difference by confinement, suspicion, pity, silence and moral judgement. These responses are still pedagogically relevant as it enables students to understand how stigma is historically and socially manifested. Here, Shakespeare's (2013) separation of bodily experience and disabling social barriers is helpful. Laura's institutional erasure and the way Bertha, Lucy and Lucilla are treated socially, emotionally and medically demonstrate that illness or disability is not enough to cause marginalisation, but that other people's interpretations will add to it. In this context, the novels reflect the inclusive principle of 'all means all' which is based on the idea that every learner deserves to be included, recognised and treated fairly in education (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Classroom-based mental health literacy is particularly relevant to the mental health aspect of these novels. Learners can consider issues of distress, misrecognition, isolation, institutional control and the impact of stigma in the context of Lucy Snowe's loneliness and psychological ambiguity, Bertha Mason's silenced madness, and Anne Catherick's vulnerability. But a pedagogical reading of Q1 should not be diagnostic readings of the characters in literature. Rather, these texts should be read as an analysis of the recognition

of mental suffering in the context of language, culture and power. It is in line with current evidence showing that school-based mental health literacy interventions can increase knowledge, decrease stigma and increase positive attitudes towards mental illness (Amado-Rodriguez et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2024). Only when guided by critical and ethical teaching, can structured mental health curricula enhance knowledge and attitudes as demonstrated by Zeidabadi et al (2025), which indicates that mental health education via the study of literature can be complementary.

The dimension of disability is most apparent in Poor Miss Finch where the blindness and epilepsy are not just plot details but are explicitly focal conditions which are explored through the themes of social perception, dependence, identity and vulnerability. The characters in the film, Lucilla Finch and Oscar Dubourg are visually blind and neuroepileptic respectively, questioning the normalcy of knowledge and beauty. Lucilla Finch's blindness is a challenge to the norms of knowledge and beauty, and Oscar Dubourg's epilepsy is a challenge to the norms of his neurological difference. These representations can challenge the students' feelings of compassion and fear about disability. This is echoed in the need for more investment in children's disability wellbeing globally as noted by Olusanya et al. (2023), which is also true for educational settings. This requires inclusive education to go beyond accommodation and to foster a disability awareness in the curriculum, in the classroom conversation and within institutional culture. Digital accessibility can also contribute to transitions and participation of pupils with special educational needs but only when it is a part of inclusive education systems and not as an alternative to structural change (Pacheco, 2023).

Pedagogical mediation is also called out as an important aspect of the discussion. Stereotypes, sensational images and historically specific views of mental illness and disability abound in Victorian texts. This means that it is important

for teachers to carefully structure these works. The intention should not be to create Victorian preconceptions, glorify suffering or sensationalise madness, but rather to enable learners to recognise the ways in which these representations were created and how important these representations are now. According to Zeng et al., (2024) mental health literacy consists of knowledge, attitudes, reducing the stigma and awareness of seeking help. This can be extended in literary classrooms to ethical approaches to reading, which foster the use of respectful language, empathy, contextual understanding and critical awareness of exclusion.

The results of this study are applicable to special education as they demonstrate the ways in which literary texts can be utilized to build awareness, mental health literacy and inclusive classroom practices that are disability sensitive. The chosen novels enable teachers to talk about issues of stigma, exclusion, accessibility, institutional control and respectful language in ways that will help students to develop their ethical and social awareness. Thus, the article sees Victorian literature as a pedagogical tool for inclusive learning environment and does not just consider it a historical artifact.

The analysis presented provides overall confirmation of the possibility of the Victorian fiction for bridging the discussion of literary study and special education discourse. These novels give historically located stories, which enable students to discuss issues with regard to stigma, confinement, accessibility, rights, institutional control, and human dignity. They can be used to teach mental health literacy and disability awareness as part of inclusive and reflective pedagogy and remain culturally complex in their literary text. The focus of the argument, however, is not on finding the ideal models of inclusion in Victorian literature, but on the cultural underpinnings of exclusion and on the prospect of students' imagining and

imagining alternatives that have more humane, responsive, and inclusive educational practices.

## 5. Conclusion

The characters of mental illness and disability are defined by historical and traditional views which are explored and exposed in Victorian fiction; this provides a useful basis for inclusive education. The chosen novels demonstrate that marginality is not necessarily a result of body or psychology but rather a product of cultural systems which delineate some minds or bodies as unstable, dependent, dangerous, or abnormal. How exclusion works is illustrated by Bertha Mason's incarceration and Lucy Snowe's emotional solitude, Laura Fairlie's institutional silence, Anne Catherick's child-like fragility, Lucilla Finch's blindness and Oscar Dubourg's epilepsy. The main point of this article is that, while the literature of the Victorian period may have models of inclusion to which one might look for perfection, it also makes one aware of the history of exclusion. It can be utilized as a problematic representation in the classroom subject to critical instruction. These texts enable learners to explore the impact on responses to mental illness and disability of feelings of fear, pity, medical power and social judgement. There are also a number of ways in which they attempt to move beyond passive sympathy to informed empathy, in which students relate to marginalised characters as people with voice and agency and dignity. In this way mental illness/disability can be represented in the Victorian context as something that can help in mental health literacy, disability awareness and inclusive pedagogy. These novels, when read in a moral educational context, take on a new, meaningful life beyond being merely historical literary texts: the novels can be used as critical resources to challenge stigma, to help increase awareness, and to envision more humane, accessible and inclusive educational possibilities.

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