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**BLINDNESS AND THE BEAST: DISABILITY, FAIRY TALE AND MYTH
IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *POOR MISS FINCH***

GYÖRGY KISS¹

Abstract

The paper offers a close reading of Wilkie Collins' 1872 novel, *Poor Miss Finch* through the lens of fairy tales, gender, and disability studies. In *Poor Miss Finch*, we follow the life of a young blind woman, Lucilla Finch, who falls in love with a man named Oscar Dubourg, whose appearance can be described as "monstrous." This plot evokes the popular tale of "Beauty and the Beast," which the paper argues is the inspiration of *Poor Miss Finch*. In his work, Collins incorporates and rethinks many elements of the fairy tale to fit them into the nineteenth-century genre of the realist novel. Oscar is not beastly in the traditional fairy-tale sense, rather his inner turmoil (his mental weakness, femininity, and possible queerness) is manifested on his body in the form of epilepsy and discolored skin. Thus, he is transformed into an Other, a figure in Victorian literature that is often hidden from (public) view. The fact that Lucilla cannot see Oscar (and knows nothing about his otherness) conjures up another well-known tale, the myth of Cupid and Psyche, that first appeared in Roman prose-writer Lucius Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* in the second century CE. This story features Psyche, who marries the god, Cupid; however, he remains invisible to her throughout their marriage. Just like Lucilla, Psyche is blind to her lover's true personality and origins. The paper examines how Collins uses disability (both Lucilla's and Oscar's) to reflect on contemporary social issues and gender roles with the disguise of fairy tales and myths.

Keywords: Victorian, disability, fairy tales, mythology, blindness

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If one is researching disabled identities and physical anomalies in Victorian fiction, Wilkie Collins is a source quite unparalleled: the majority of his novels feature at least one character who is disabled or disfigured. In his biography of Collins, Peter Ackroyd writes, “in his published work he often draws attention to physical abnormalities that give a clue to distinctive character, [. . .] he also mentions among other ailments epilepsy, spinal defects, facial deformities, and paralysis of the limbs.”² Ackroyd connects Collins’s lifelong literary interest of physical otherness to the author’s unusual appearance and bodily afflictions. Not only was Collins’s “head too large for his body; his arms and his legs too short, while his hands and feet were too small,”³ he was a chronic sufferer of rheumatic gout as well. In more ways than one, these illnesses and deformities all can be found in the pages of Collins’s works, but as I see it, no other novel mirrors his real-life experience more than *Poor Miss Finch*, which revolves around blindness. In her introduction to the novel, Catherine Peters claims that Collins “suffered himself from lifelong short sight, and also from a disease which caused both severe arthritis and recurrent inflammation of the eyes, which was painfully affecting them at the time he was writing *Poor Miss Finch*.”⁴ The novel was published in 1872 and uses blindness as its central theme, amongst other disabilities and bodily differences. Losing one’s sight is a topic not uncommon to the literature of the Victorian era; however, the majority of novels that feature blindness incorporate this notion into an overarching theme that often moves away from the faithful portrayal of disability and address contemporary social issues instead. For example, Bertha Plummer’s physical blindness in Dickens’s *The Cricket on the Heart* (1845) is secondary to her blind unconsciousness of (proper) social roles for girls and women. By the end of the short story, she learns to see how to behave as her position requires her to, but never regains her real sight. *Poor Miss Finch* offers a more complex narrative in which blindness functions on several levels. The novel remains one of the few Victorian works that explore the notion of blindness not only as a metaphor, but a medical condition as well, while also taking account of the psychological implications and effects of visual impairment. While Collins occasionally relies on conventional disability metaphors and tropes that are considered harmful nowadays, I find his overall approach toward blindness progressive compared to other disability representations of the period. As Kate Flint states that in “Collins’s fiction the ‘abnormal’ and the ‘normal’ are not made clearly distinct from one another. [. . .] The conditions of disablement are evoked in ways which make able-bodied readers reflect on the workings of their own senses, and their deficiencies, as well as their

² Peter Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 1.

³ Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins*, 1.

⁴ Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, int. Catherine Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), x.

powers.”⁵ *Poor Miss Finch* is relatively little-known alongside classics like *The Woman in White* (1859) or *The Moonstone* (1868), yet it is a familiar work in the field of Victorian disability studies for its highly unique depiction of physical impairment. In my paper, I argue that the multilayered exploration of blindness and disability in *Poor Miss Finch* is achieved through the use of myth and fairy tale, mainly the ancient ‘Cupid and Psyche’ myth and the tale of ‘Beauty and the Beast.’ I also claim that the novel’s main characters are modern reimaged figures of these classic texts, as Collins reworks the tales’ original structure with his own narrative of disability and physical otherness. Since this intertextual aspect of the novel is often mentioned in scholarly papers written about *Poor Miss Finch*, but rarely the focus of such works, I read Collins’s novel primarily in this context, while also taking account of the cultural history of disability in the Victorian era.

Collins’s decision to draw inspiration from the fairy tale world is quite plausible, for in its core, the genre is strongly connected to disability. According to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder:

The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world. [. . .] Since what we now call disability has been historically narrated as that which characterizes a body as deviant from shared norms of bodily appearance and ability, disability has functioned throughout history as one of the most marked and remarked on differences that propel the act of storytelling into existence.⁶

Stories like Andersen’s “Thumbelina” (1835), “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf” (1859), or the Grimm Brothers’ “The Maiden Without Hands” (1812), and “Cinderella” (1812), are just a few examples of the many fables that operate with physically disfigured main characters. “Beauty and the Beast,” one of the most beloved and well-known fairy tales today, uses the same pattern with its enchanted prince who is forced to live a secluded life, cursed with a monstrous figure. As fairy stories go, “Beauty and the Beast” has many origins and variations all over the globe, as anticipated, yet in Western culture the most prevalent version is Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve’s 1740 rendition, largely based on the Roman myth of “Cupid and Psyche.” This tale is part of a bigger narrative by Apuleius, titled *The Golden Ass* (sometimes titled or translated as *Metamorphoses*), which was written in the second century CE. The myth features Psyche, who marries the god Cupid; however, he remains invisible to her throughout their marriage. E. J. Kenney writes, “through the tale of Cupid

⁵ Kate Flint, “Disability and Difference,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 165.

⁶ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 53–54.

and Psyche [. . .] Apuleius' book has exerted its greatest influence. The story has been a perennial source of inspiration to poets, dramatists, composers for opera and ballet, and artists,"⁷ and Collins is no exception. In *Poor Miss Finch*, we follow the life of a young blind woman, Lucilla Finch, who falls in love with a man named Oscar Dubourg, whose appearance can be described as monster-like: his skin turns blue as a result of medication. The fact that Lucilla cannot see Oscar (and knows nothing about his otherness) conjures up both "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cupid and Psyche," thus providing a mythical, fairy tale framework to the novel.

Although the plot evokes these familiar tales, Collins incorporates and rethinks many of their elements to fit them into the nineteenth-century genre of the realist, although the novel has its own outlandish twists. As Hilary Newman suggests, "Collins's novels delight, but they also disguise their subversive ideas on disability by smuggling them in under fairy-tale plots and character elements."⁸ Ultimately, *Poor Miss Finch* is a novel about otherness, whether it be physical, social, or mental divergence from the norm. Adopting Lennard J. Davis's interpretation of disability narratives, *Poor Miss Finch* reproduces "on some level, the semiologically normative signs surrounding the reader, that paradoxically help the reader to read those signs in the world as well as the text. This normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject, and so on."⁹ The whole of dramatis personae of Collins's novel consists almost exclusively of figures that are somehow considered other: for example, through the French Madame Pratolungo and the comic Herr Grosse, often referred to only as "the German," Collins displays Victorian distrust and superiority towards foreigners. The portrayal of Jicks, the youngest member of the Finch family, is also rather puzzling: on the one hand, as an animal-like child in her behavior, she is rendered subhuman; on the other, Collins places her in a colonial framework as he calls her "the wandering Arab of the Finch family."¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is through the figures of Lucilla and Oscar that fairy tale, myth, disability, and otherness are principally explored: "The plot of *Poor Miss Finch* focuses on two bodies, each notably marked: the blue Oscar and the blind Lucilla."¹¹ Mitchell and Snyder's notion of narrative

⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, int. and trans. E. J. Kenney (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), Introduction, Kindle.

⁸ Hilary Newman, "John Kitto's *The Lost Senses: Deafness and Blindness* and Wilkie Collins's *Hide and Seek* and *Poor Miss Finch*," *The Wilkie Collins Journal* 12 (2013), accessed August 17, 2022, <https://wilkiecollinssociety.org/john-kittos-the-lost-senses-deafness-and-blindness-and-wilkie-collinss-hide-and-seek-and-poor-miss-finch/>.

⁹ Lennard J. Davis, "Introduction," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9.

¹⁰ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 426.

¹¹ Samuel Lyndon Gladden, "Spectacular Deceptions: Closets, Secrets, and Identity in Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch*," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33, no. 2 (2005): 470, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058724>.

prosthesis is a greatly influential concept to the world of twenty-first-century literary disability studies. By treating “disability as a narrative device, [. . .] disability characterization can be understood as a prosthetic contrivance upon which so many of our cultural and literary narratives rely,” Mitchell and Snyder claim, noting also that in this sense “disability provides an important barometer by which to assess shifting values and norms imposed upon the body.”¹² Following this train of thought, I analyze Lucilla and Oscar in relation to their mythological and fairy tale counterparts, physical otherness, and disability to understand the variety of cultural and social meanings that are inscribed in them. However, I stress that it would be problematic to fully read these two characters as their mythical and fairy tale counterparts. While the reader can indeed find many similarities between these figures, I think Lucilla cannot be thoroughly interpreted as Psyche, and Oscar as Cupid or the Beast.

In the preface of his novel, Collins writes:

More than one charming blind girl, in fiction and in the drama, has preceded “Poor Miss Finch.” But, so far as I know, blindness in these cases has been always exhibited, more or less exclusively, from the ideal and the sentimental point of view. The attempt here made is to appeal to an interest of another kind, by exhibiting blindness as it really is. [. . .] Whenever “Lucilla” acts or speaks in these pages, with reference to her blindness, she is doing or saying what persons afflicted as she is have done or said before her.¹³

The author’s objective of a realistic portrayal is apparent, as he indeed used real-life sources concerning the blind experience. As Catherine Peters points out, amongst other influences, Collins relied on observations by William Cheselden, who recovered from blindness through surgery and became an ophthalmic surgeon himself, as well as essays and letters by John Locke and Denis Diderot about blindness, vision, and human understanding.¹⁴ “Of the other features which I have added to produce and sustain interest in this central personage of my story,” Collins goes on to say, “it does not become me to speak.”¹⁵ For, in spite of the earnest desire for a truthful representation, Collins cannot (or does not want to) entirely separate Lucilla from the well-known images and tropes of blindness. By naming her Lucilla and describing her as a mirror image of Raphael’s Madonna di San Sisto, Collins creates his own version of Saint Lucy, who is known as the Christian patron saint of the blind. This heavenly legacy of Saint Lucy also corroborates with the figure of Psyche as well, who is looked on and treated

¹² David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 225.

¹³ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, xxxix.

¹⁴ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 428.

¹⁵ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, xxxix.

as a goddess because of her divine beauty. Lucilla's own identity is rather ambiguous, as Collins destroys and rebuilds it throughout the novel. Although her character reveals certain aspects of Saint Lucy and Psyche, Lucilla differs greatly from the women that are reimagined in her figure; the tradition of the saintly blind woman and the personality of Psyche are completely changed.

The myth of "Cupid and Psyche" is essentially about curiosity: Psyche wants to see the concealed husband she was forced to wed. In Villeneuve's version, Beauty can see the Beast, but only in an indirect way: "the Fairy undertook the direction of your dreams, causing you to behold my natural form in your nightly slumbers, and directing your attention by day to various portraits of myself."¹⁶ Cupid and Psyche are united in the dark bedroom only without seeing each other, where their way of communication is through talking and touching. Apuleius' line, "that night her husband spoke to Psyche—for though she could not see him, her hands and ears told her that he was there,"¹⁷ could easily be read as an experience of Lucilla's: similarly to Psyche, she cannot see her husband-to-be, Oscar. It takes time for Psyche to warm to her invisible partner and she is rather lost in the dark, but Collins assures the reader of Lucilla's confidence in her blindness from the first moment: "instead of her blindness making her nervous in the presence of a man unknown to her, it appeared to have exactly the contrary effect. It made her fearless."¹⁸ This does not only create a barrier between Lucilla and Psyche, but also separates her from the conventional portrayals of blind women in literature, for "the label blind girl consistently invokes a disempowered figure."¹⁹ In this sense, even the title of the novel is telling: "'poor' is habitually appended to 'blind woman' in both fictional and nonfictional texts, where it serves as a code word for the extremity of her physical and economic dependence," writes Martha Stoddard Holmes, "the novel's title cues us to expect the usual sad and sentimental portrayal of a blind woman."²⁰ But as Stoddard Holmes points out, Collins overthrows expectations when the reader is introduced to the free-spirited, physically and economically self-reliant Lucilla Finch, who is anything but a "poor" creature to be pitied. Knowing her way in the dark, she scorns her companion and friend Madame

¹⁶ Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, *The Story of Beauty and the Beast*, trans. Ernest Dowson (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 86.

¹⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Five.

¹⁸ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 37.

¹⁹ David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2016), 50.

²⁰ Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 84.

Pratolungo who offers to navigate her: “My dear Madame Pratolungo! I know my way better than you do. I roam all over the neighborhood, with nothing to help me but this [my walking-cane].”²¹

Lucilla not only departs from the usual literary portrayals of blind women, but her behavior and unusual character also dismantle the expected demeanor of female fairy-tale characters who are physically impaired. In the Grimms’ “The Maiden Without Hands,” the heroine’s father makes a deal with the devil that ends with the man having to cut his own daughter’s hand off. His passive, pious daughter accepts her fate and then wanders around the world with her arms mutilated, hoping to find people who will take pity on her. Andersen’s “Thumbelina” follows a similar path: although its protagonist is not disabled in the literal sense, she is clearly and visibly a physical Other with her height, as her name suggests. In the story, Thumbelina’s lack of agency is evident. She is abducted from her home and repeatedly pressured into marriage with various small animals, only to be rescued in the last moments, not by her own free will, but by a swallow she befriended. Additionally, forms of physical disability in fairy tales often serve as punishment. This is especially true in the case of antagonistic characters: for example, in “Cinderella” by the Brothers Grimm, the wicked stepsisters infamously cut off pieces from their own feet to fit them into the glass slipper. An even more brutal turn concludes the story as the sisters go blind when Cinderella’s pigeons gouge their eyes out. In Andersen’s “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf,” selfish Inga is punished by a witch to remain motionless for years as a living statue, having constant physical pain, which can easily be interpreted as a metaphor for paralysis. Collins inverts the tradition of disability as punishment in Lucilla’s case: for her, it is the physical sight that is the punishment, and it is the recovery of the loss of sight that makes her whole again.

Lucilla follows Psyche’s path in considerable detail, yet Psyche lacks this great deal of independence Lucilla shows. However, a notable similarity between them is the sexuality inscribed in their nature. As a girl who is likened to Venus in beauty and form, Psyche cannot eradicate the sexual connotations and attributes that are associated with the goddess. Apuleius is overt about Psyche’s sexual encounters with Cupid: “now there entered her unknown husband; he had mounted the bed, made her his wife, and departed in haste before sunrise.”²² This can be read as a repeating, nightly pattern, for Apuleius notes that “the novelty of her situation became pleasurable to her by force of habit.”²³ Lucilla’s sexuality is handled in an intriguing and complex way, as Collins originates this feature of hers directly

²¹ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 18.

²² Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Five.

²³ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Five.

from her disability. After observing Lucilla's open demeanor, frankness, and repeated disregard of social rules, Madame Pratolungo draws the conclusion that, "here was one strange side shown to me of the terrible affliction that darkened her life. It meant that modesty is essentially the growth of our own consciousness of the eyes of others judging us—and that blindness is never bashful, for the one simple reason that blindness cannot see."²⁴ Lucilla's public displays of affection toward Oscar often contradict the expected, respectable behavior for young women at the time, but "she, poor soul, strong in her blind insensibility to all shafts of ridicule shot from the eye, cared nothing for the presence of a third person."²⁵ Besides the absence of self-awareness regarding proper social conduct, Lucilla's sexuality is best expressed and experienced through touching. As a blind woman, Lucilla relies immensely on her sense of touch, which Kate Flint describes as "the most intimate of the senses, and the emphasis on her possession of this ability is highly appropriate to Collins's portrayal of this highly sexualised individual."²⁶ Drawing on Price and Shildrick, David Bolt writes, "in the context of disability, the sense of touch 'frustrates hierarchy,' because it 'crosses boundaries rather than creates distance.'"²⁷ Interestingly enough, touching and its possible intimate, boundary-breaking or sexual connotations are hardly ever written about with other blind female characters in Victorian fiction.

By inscribing sexuality into Lucilla's identity as a blind woman, Collins brings her closer to Psyche, and at the same time alienates her from the figure of Saint Lucy completely, and Lucilla becomes almost like a parody of the sentimental and romanticized image of the sexless, angelic disabled girl that is commonly depicted in other Victorian works, such as the blind, pious Margaret Jennings in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848). The use of hands plays a significant role in the early stages of Margaret's story also, for she has to do delicate manual labor every day as a seamstress to earn a living. It is the constant work in low light that eventually destroys her eyesight, ending her days as a seamstress. Unlike Collins, however, Gaskell's narrative does not dwell on the possibilities and obstacles of knowing by touch, perhaps because Margaret already knows her surroundings and the people in her life. Instead of the physical sensation and acquisition of knowledge with the help of her hands and fingers, the focus is on Margaret's voice, which takes on a quite otherworldly quality, elevating her to an angelic sphere. The previously mentioned Bertha Plummer from *The Cricket on the Heart* comes closer to sexual desire, but eventually learns that as a blind girl she cannot marry and accepts her fate

²⁴ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 59.

²⁵ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 175.

²⁶ Flint, "Disability and Difference," 160.

²⁷ Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, 76.

as a passive child-woman. She exists in the intersection of childhood and adulthood, as she is permanently stuck between these two stages. Unlike Margaret, Bertha uses a needle in her daily work even though she was born blind: as a doll's dressmaker, she is constantly surrounded by the world of children. In addition to the childlike aspects of dolls and dressmaking, it is worth highlighting the domestic nature of this kind of work, which crosses the boundaries between child and wife, and seemingly prepares Bertha for adulthood. Bertha longs for companionship and love, and although she is not nearly as open or transgressive as Lucilla, she is rather forward compared to Margaret. Nevertheless, her desires are not acted out by touching.

Compared to these two figures, it is clear that Lucilla's position is doubly unique, for as Stoddard Holmes points out, she "is allowed what even nondisabled Victorian heroines are usually denied, an assertive, abundantly expressed sexuality that does not result in prostitution, religious conversion, tragic death [. . .]. Her desires are both reciprocated and approved within the society of the novel, making her rare among disabled women characters and unheard of among blind ones."²⁸ In his comparative work of blindness in literature published almost a hundred years after *Poor Miss Finch*, Jacob Twersky praises Collins for his realistic depiction of Lucilla, stating that "Lucilla Finch is one of the most human persons among the sightless characters in literature. If to have human feelings and desires is to be normal, then she is one of the most normal persons among the sightless characters in literature."²⁹ In this manner, Collins succeeded with his plan of "exhibiting blindness as it really is," even if Lucilla is presented in the figures of well-known myths and fairy tales.

When it comes to the male characters, there are no obvious similarities between Oscar Dubourg and Cupid, they resemble each other mostly in their differences: both are objects of the stare, and the notion of (not) seeing are inscribed into their nature in different ways. In Greek and Roman mythology, Cupid is often a presence *felt* through his arrows (that brings us back to the subject of touching) rather than being a physical embodiment that is seen. In his true form, his sublime essence as a God is hardly fit for the human eye, as Psyche herself, upon looking at her husband for the first time, was "unnerved by the wonderful vision, [and] was no longer mistress of herself."³⁰ Oscar, on the other hand, is stared at because of his dubious past and shocking appearance. As unusual, extraordinary beings, Cupid and

²⁸ Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 84.

²⁹ Jacob Twersky, *Blindness in Literature: Examples of Depictions and Attitudes* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1955), 35.

³⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Five.

Oscar equally cannot escape being stared at, for this notion is “a conduit of knowledge [. . .] to make the unknown known, to render legible something that seems at first glance incomprehensible.”³¹ Oscar himself uses the word *stare* in the novel when he talks about the public’s unfavorable reception towards him: “Have *you* been stared at by hundreds of cruel eyes?” [. . .] Have *you* been pointed at, without mercy, wherever you go? Have you been put in the pillory of the newspapers? [. . .] [T]he horrible public! I can’t get away from them—I can’t hide myself.”³² Even when he is proven innocent in a criminal case, Oscar cannot escape the questioning and damning looks of the public, he cannot erase this social stigma. “Staring can also be a social act that stigmatizes by designating people whose bodies or behaviors cannot be readily absorbed into the visual status quo,”³³ writes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, whose idea of the othered body brings me to my next point. One can hardly read Oscar fully as a Cupid-like godly being; he is rather like an inverse of the mythical figure, observed for the wrong reasons. True, he *is* otherworldly, but in the negative sense of the word: he is the Victorian equivalent of the feared and beastly image of a husband Venus planned for Psyche to fall in love with. In Apuleius’ myth, Venus plans to punish Psyche for she equals her in beauty. She wants her to “be seized with a burning passion for the lowest of mankind, some creature cursed by Fortune in rank, in estate, in condition, someone so degraded that in all the world he can find no wretchedness to equal his own.”³⁴

Oscar fits this description in several ways: he is undeniably “cursed [. . .] in condition,” for his body is another key factor in his stigmatizing process. However, Oscar is not monstrous in the traditional “Beauty and the Beast” logic, instead his inner turmoil (his mental weakness, possible queerness that arises from his femininity, and his questionable criminal background) are manifested on his body in the form of epilepsy and discolored skin: “The man’s face, instead of exhibiting any of the usual shades of complexion, was hideously distinguished by a superhuman—I had almost said a devilish—colouring of livid blackish blue!”³⁵ The constitutionally and psychologically weak, blue-skinned Oscar once again is the target of the stare: “the appearance of disability in the public sphere makes, then, for a stareable sight. As such, the way we imagine human disability provides us with one of the best opportunities to understand how we stare.”³⁶ Of course, reading disability and physical otherness as a bodily manifestation of inward evil or wrong is understood to be highly problematic and

³¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15.

³² Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 40.

³³ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 44.

³⁴ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Four.

³⁵ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 105.

³⁶ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 20.

harmful nowadays. Still, there is a different aspect of Oscar's blueness that conveys rather remarkable ideas for the period. While Collins uses Madame Pratolungo's and Herr Grosse's foreignness for comedic relief, the racial angle of Oscar's dark skin is quite layered. As Jessica Durgan argues, the color blue is "useful and slippery as a signifier of otherness, perfect for indirectly addressing Collins's ongoing concerns regarding racial prejudice and Britain's treatment of its imperial subjects."³⁷ Foreign figures in Collins's work are just as common as disabled ones, and this is not the first time he addresses racial issues and the affairs of the Empire with its colonies. While *The Moonstone* adopts a more direct and evident approach, *Poor Miss Finch* treats this subject rather subtly:

It is in the choice of coloring that this move of indirect subversion is accomplished, as Oscar's bizarre blueness flies under the popular radar, appearing to be merely an artistic fancy, a privilege of the literary imagination. The fantastic nature of the transformation allows Collins to disavow his political agenda on the surface, while simultaneously placing color and its role as a marker of difference in the foreground of the narrative.³⁸

One could argue that Oscar's "ugly personal change"³⁹ and ugly bodies, by definition, "often reveal less about the figures themselves than their respective cultures. [. . .] Brands of 'ugly' can turn ordinary bodies into extraordinary bearers of social meanings."⁴⁰ On the one hand, society's general response to Oscar's grotesque image are disgusted, scared, bewildered stares, and since such a sight is forbidden in the public sphere, Oscar settles at the small, out of the way village of Dimchurch, a definite space of otherness: "the avoidance of ugly sights has grown into a trope to reinforce what is culturally stigmatized, forbidden or foreign."⁴¹ Here he meets Lucilla, who soon becomes a bright counterpart to his dark entity.

The dichotomy of darkness and light runs throughout *Poor Miss Finch*, mostly paralleled in the figures of Lucilla and Oscar. Lucilla represents light in spite of living in her dark world, as her name comes from the Latin word "lux" meaning "light," whereas the dark-skinned, depressive Oscar is able to see the light of the physical world that Lucilla cannot and resents it because of his own image and also because it is an obstacle in his happiness with Lucilla. By being blind, Lucilla is one of the few people who cannot stare at Oscar and judge him for his discoloration. However, one of Lucilla's recurring identifying traits is her aversion to dark colors she can almost magically feel but cannot see:

³⁷ Jessica Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 53.

³⁸ Durgan, *Art, Race and Fantastic Color Change*, 51.

³⁹ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 119.

⁴⁰ Gretchen E. Henderson, *Ugliness: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 28.

⁴¹ Henderson, *Ugliness*, 134.

“She has a positively painful association with dark colors, on certain occasions. They sometimes produce a disagreeable impression on her nerves, through her sense of touch.”⁴² As Lucilla claims, “I have my own blind horror of anything that is dark,”⁴³ and the reader also learns that Lucilla’s prejudice is not clear from racial associations either, when she admits, “try as I might to resist it, my mind drew a dreadful picture of the Hindoo, as a kind of monster in human form.”⁴⁴ Oscar, frail and uncertain, decides not to confide in his beloved about his dark skin until marriage and asks Lucilla’s family to also keep his secret; a controversial choice, yet it is not entirely without reason, considering Oscar’s past experiences concerning his otherness.

This aspect of the novel evokes the Brothers Grimm version of Beauty and the Beast myth, entitled “The Singing, Springing Lark” (1815). In this tale, the monster who is cursed to be a lion does not initially regain a human form through the love of the protagonist, since he is partly able to maintain his former princely appearance: “during the day he and his men were lions, and during the night they assumed their true human forms.”⁴⁵ The duality of light and darkness comes into play here, as it does with Lucilla and Oscar; however, when the heroine brings the Beast out of his castle, she is told that this act could be “too dangerous for him because if a ray of light were to fall upon him, he would be changed into a dove and have to fly about with the doves for seven years,”⁴⁶ a warning that prophesizes the Beast’s coming fate. Apuleius’ influence is unmistakable in the whole text, but this particular section mirrors Cupid’s flight from Psyche significantly. Even though the heroine promises her companion that she is going to “protect him from the light,”⁴⁷ the readers know that her blunder and the Beast’s consequent departure is inevitable. When it comes to Oscar, he might receive protection from Lucilla’s family, but his secret does come to light (both in a literal and symbolic sense), when Lucilla decides to have an eye surgery so she can physically see him.

Both Psyche’s and Lucilla’s curiosity and desire to see their lovers remain unknown to them as long as they believe there is no way of erasing the darkness from their lives. In both instances, the changing force is external: Psyche is convinced by her sisters to glance at her husband by lighting a candle, and Lucilla is prompted to undergo a cataract surgery to restore her vision by her eye doctor,

⁴² Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 152.

⁴³ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 14.

⁴⁴ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 118.

⁴⁵ Jack Zipes, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes (Woodstock, UK: Princeton University Press, 2014), 279.

⁴⁶ Zipes, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales*, 279.

⁴⁷ Zipes, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales*, 279.

which she accepts only to see Oscar. Psyche is posed as a passive agent whose first act of autonomy (peeking at her husband through the light of the candle) becomes her hubris, leading to her downfall and the loss of her beloved. Cupid is injured by the wax of the candle and flees; so does Oscar when Lucilla is able to see again, for he fears Lucilla would not love him with his outlandish appearance. Consequently, Lucilla unwittingly creates her own misery with the operation of her eyes, as the ability to see brings punishment. Her hubris, just like Psyche's, is curiosity.

The two heroines' quest for love begins as soon as they lose their partner. Nevertheless, their journey is anything but traditionally heroic. Psyche becomes "overwhelmed completely by the weight of dangers she was powerless to cope with,"⁴⁸ and Lucilla loses the confidence and independence she possessed earlier as a blind woman: "My conscience accuses me, now I am alone—and yet, God knows, it is not my fault. Poor Oscar! Poor me!"⁴⁹ The ironic 'poor' attribute of the first half of the novel is now used in its literal meaning, yet Collins overthrows expectations again, for it is anticipated that Lucilla's life is becoming easier after the successful eye surgery. "The restoration of my sight has made a new creature of me. I have gained a sense—I am no longer the same woman,"⁵⁰ she says. Nevertheless, the sense she gained is not more reliable than the other senses she trusts: even as a sighted woman, she is deceived and lied to by Oscar's scheming brother, Nugent. From the beginning, Psyche is no match for Lucilla in terms of self-confidence and agency. Nevertheless, after Cupid leaves her, she becomes even more helpless than she was before. Psyche looks at Cupid by the light of a candle in spite of his orders: this is an act of denial against the divine will, which always carries a penalty in Greek and Roman mythology. Not only does Psyche suffer the wrath of Venus in the form of physical abuse and impossible tasks, but she is repeatedly driven to the brink of suicide: "Psyche set out willingly, not because she expected to fulfil her task, but meaning to find a respite from her sufferings by throwing herself from a rock into the river."⁵¹ Although Lucilla also suffers, her pain does not manifest in such extreme and serious actions. Collins reinterprets Psyche's aimless wanderings as Lucilla's inner torment. Like Psyche, Lucilla's search for truth and knowledge has led her to the opposite direction, and now, despite having regained her sight, she is unable to see and understand not only where Oscar is, but also who she is and how her two identities, blind and sighted, can be reconciled.

⁴⁸ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Six.

⁴⁹ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 371.

⁵⁰ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 329.

⁵¹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book Six.

After her surgery, Lucilla is instructed by her doctor to rest her eyes to avoid any mental disturbance; but, similarly to her mythical counterpart, she cannot feel at ease when she believes her love life and happiness to be at peril. As a result, she loses her vision again: “the mischief done to her eyes by her reckless use of them, by her fits of crying, by her disturbed nights, by the long-continued strain on her of agitation and suspense, has evidently justified the worst of those unacknowledged forebodings which Grosse [her doctor] felt when he saw her.”⁵² However, her second loss of sight might be read as a self-inflicted coping mechanism as well as a medical condition. Upon the many disappointments, Lucilla admits, “there was a moment when I actually wished myself blind again,”⁵³ and her wish eventually comes true. Lucilla’s second blindness could also be described as a variation on the King Oedipus myth. In Sophocles’ play of the same name (c. 429 BCE), Oedipus blind himself after realizing that his father’s murderer, whom he had been looking for, is himself. In this interpretation, knowledge is coupled with physical sight: by choosing to be blind, Oedipus seemingly tries to shield his eyes from the truth which he cannot face, which completely transforms his identity, his experience, and the world he has known. In *Poor Miss Finch*, the cause of Lucilla’s recurring blindness remains unresolved. Collins deliberately wants the reader to question whether it is the cause of medical incompetence or Lucilla’s strong will and distressed disposition.

Lucilla is reconnected with Oscar only after she goes blind for the second time, achieving their “happily ever after” ending. Ann Schmiesing writes, “when a disabled hero is portrayed, his heroic qualities are often brought to the fore as he triumphs despite the social stigma of his disability—a triumph typically rewarded in fairy tales with the magical erasure of his physical anomaly.”⁵⁴ Although there is no symbolic scene of transformation from Beast to Prince in *Poor Miss Finch*, in his own, quiet way, Oscar does triumph in the end and is rewarded accordingly. His journey regarding his own identity and physical otherness is quite the opposite of Lucilla’s. While Lucilla is introduced at the beginning of the novel as a transgressive young woman, secure in herself and her physical abilities, the epileptic, blue-skinned Oscar lets his bodily anomaly take complete control of his life. He allows himself much less physical and mental freedom of movement than the blind Lucilla. After Lucilla’s operation, the roles are reversed: while the desolate Lucilla suffers from an identity crisis, Oscar gains self-confidence in his solitude and his newfound boldness helps him cope with his disfigurement. He comes clean to

⁵² Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 374.

⁵³ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 329.

⁵⁴ Ann Schmiesing, *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 2.

Lucilla, who welcomes his affections in spite of his (inner and outer) darkness. To reach such a conclusion, Lucilla indeed has to lose her sight, otherwise her romance with Oscar would not be possible: “Do you think I wish to see him disfigured as he is now? No! I wish to see him—and I do see him!—as my fancy drew his picture in the first days of our love,”⁵⁵ she admits. The last words she speaks in the novel are, “My blindness is my blessing,” and “My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness.”⁵⁶ Thus, Collins’s own versions of Cupid and Psyche are reunited again in a full circle moment, reshaping the original Apuleius ending since, in the world of Lucilla and Oscar, darkness is not feared and distrusted but embraced by the end.

In *Poor Miss Finch*, the personal, symbolic, cultural, and psychological approaches towards disability seamlessly merge together in a foundation based on myth and fairy tale. In order to understand the core idea of the novel in relation to fairy tales and myths, one needs to go back to its origins yet again. Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian reading of “Beauty and the Beast,” wherein he asserts that “the girl can transfer—and transform—this oedipal love for her father most freely and happily to her lover,”⁵⁷ is hardly applicable to the *Poor Miss Finch*, considering Lucilla’s personal relationship with his father is nearly nonexistent. On the other hand, it would be deficient and rather uninspired to state that Collins’s novel was written only to support the age-old belief of beauty lying within. Collins was more likely motivated by the morals of “Cupid and Psyche,” creating a parable of his own that partially rewrites the teachings of the ancient myth. To quote Kenney, “Cupid and Psyche” is “thematically the story of a, or rather the, human soul in quest of salvation through union with the divine.”⁵⁸ *Poor Miss Finch*, although occasionally evoking religious imagery, remains a non-spiritual work, “salvation” and “union with the divine” therefore translate to human experiences in the “real” world. As I observe above, Psyche’s hubris is her curiosity, which resonates with Lucilla’s wish to know what it would be like to see. By the end of their stories, both learn the error of their ways, but Lucilla’s case is rather exceptional; for she, unlike Psyche, stays in the dark, yet becomes content with her situation, a closure Flint calls “an inversion of the profeminist ending of *Jane Eyre*.”⁵⁹ Following this logic, the ultimate theme of *Poor Miss Finch* is acceptance and love: not only for the Beast, but for oneself as a blind woman. Collins’s own lines in the preface seem to confirm this possibility: “I subscribe to the article

⁵⁵ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 418.

⁵⁶ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 418.

⁵⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, “The Animal-Groom Cycle of Fairy Tales,” in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 2010), Kindle.

⁵⁸ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Introduction.

⁵⁹ Flint, “Disability and Difference,” 161.

of belief which declares, that the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction, and that it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness. These are the views which 'Poor Miss Finch' is intended to advocate."⁶⁰ Be that as it may, I believe the ending is more ambiguous than this, as one can also read Lucilla's acceptance as resignation and her marriage as a surrender to social norms, a shared experience of exclusion and marginalization with Oscar. In both readings, the approach is strikingly un-Victorian, either reversing or criticizing traditional disability narratives, setting forth the notion that "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person."⁶¹ Stoddard Holmes also points out how singular *Poor Miss Finch* is, for the novel's "core narrative of a blind woman falling in love, marrying, and having children—without first being 'cured'—remains a rarity in fiction and film."⁶² By experiencing life both as a seeing and unseeing individual, Lucilla understands where her true nature lies and achieves salvation as a disabled person by the end of the novel.

⁶⁰ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, xxxix.

⁶¹ Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2.

⁶² Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 60.

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