

Once Upon a Blind Girl: Disability and Fairy Tale in Charles Dickens's *The Cricket on the Hearth*

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a close reading of Charles Dickens's Christmas novella, *The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home* (1845), through the lens of fairy tales and disability studies. One of the main characters of the story is Bertha Plummer, a blind doll's dressmaker. Since her father deceives and hides the truth from her, Bertha is unaware of the real nature of her economic and social circumstances as a disabled, working-class woman. Her disability is crucial to the plot as it is strongly connected to the novella's themes of domestic infidelity, disguise, and the lack of perspective or understanding. The paper analyzes how Dickens explores these ideas through Bertha's blindness with the use of fairy tales. It relies on academic sources written about Bertha, fairy tales, as well as disability and Victorian gender roles. (GyK)

KEYWORDS: disability, fairy tale, Charles Dickens, blindness, Victorian, gender



The literature of the Victorian period abounds in disabled characters. Often, they are not in the forefront: fictional figures with signs of physical Otherness, disfigurement, and bodily impairment are usually hidden in the shadows of traditional, able-bodied protagonists. As Martha Stoddard Holmes argues, even though they might be only in the background, disabled characters perform “an astonishing variety of narrative work, the social identity arising from their impairments actually *enabling* them to play a host of necessary plot roles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is not in spite but rather because of their exclusion from certain plot-lines” (63). Clare Walker Gore similarly points out that even though disabled characters in Victorian novels are often unable to do physical work or gain a profession because of their weak constitution, on a textual level they are “working all the time to keep the wheels of the plot grinding—working, in other words, to make the novel work”¹ (*Plotting* 3).

Charles Dickens frequently portrayed various forms of physical deficiencies in his works. It is difficult to draw a general conclusion about his disabled figures: they are as diverse and complex as the author's able-bodied characters. *The Old Curiosity Shop's* misshapen dwarf, Mr. Quilp, is sadly used as an image of immoral monstrosity. Smike's portrayal in *Nicholas Nickleby* is similarly unfortunate: a cripple in a clear position (his disability never otherwise specified) who relies on the novel's titular hero physically and spiritually. In a sense, Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* is a figure of pity as well, functioning as a tragic element in a sentimental plot. Nevertheless, there seems to be a gradual shift in Dickens's understanding of disability and bodily difference in his literary career: in *David Copperfield*, for instance, the initially ridiculed Miss Mowcher confesses to David later in the novel that her flighty manner and foolish behavior are only acts to deflect the public's attention from her dwarfism, a surprisingly unique and honest approach towards disability in the literature of the period. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens's last completed novel, Jenny Wren's characterization is handled with even more care and depth: even though she uses crutches, she is no victim, but rather an active, working young woman with agency and independence. These attributes were often denied from earlier Dickensian disabled characters, like in the case of the fairy tale-inspired *The Cricket on the Hearth's* blind Bertha Plummer. This paper analyzes how Dickens explores questions of gender and disability in Victorian society through the use of fairy tales, fairy-tale tropes and motifs in the aforementioned novella, especially through the character of Bertha. I look at European fairy-tale patterns, characters, and elements that either relate to the content of Dickens's novella or can be seen as potentially influential on his work, while also referencing disabled and physically Othered fairy-tale figures and characters from other works of Dickens and in the novels of some famous Victorian literary authors.

The subtitle of *The Cricket on the Hearth* is "A Fairy Tale of Home." It tells a parable about the sanctity of the home as well as a cautionary tale for those who might disturb this domestic peace. It centers around two relationships: that of husband and wife John and Mary (Dot) Peerybingle on the one hand, and Caleb Plummer and his blind daughter, on the other. Bertha's disability is crucial to the plot as it is strongly connected to the novella's themes of domestic infidelity, disguise, and the lack of perspective or understanding. All these ideas are explored within a fairy-tale framework with magical elements and otherworldly characters. Even though it does not take place during the winter holidays, the novella was published as part of

Dickens's five Christmas books. Preceded by the immensely popular *A Christmas Carol* and *The Chimes*, *The Cricket* was originally intended to be published periodically to put "the homely ideals of the *Carol* into wider circulation" (Douglas-Fairhurst xxii). This authorial wish remained unfulfilled, and consequent Christmas books tended to shift their focus away from the domestic: *The Battle of Life* tells a sentimental love story that connects personal struggles to historic battles, while *The Haunted Man* recaptures the *Carol's* supernatural theme with a ghostly bargain.

The Cricket on the Hearth generated diverse critical responses. One reviewer wrote that "there is not much ingenuity, and no nature in the plot. . . . Its merit lies in its sentiment which is yet extremely liable to the charge of being mawkish and maudlin" (Collins 181), while a different critic encouraged the author and claimed that "We are happy to find that Mr Dickens . . . has left the question of social wrongs and rights to the discussion of those who can consider them in a calmer and less partial spirit, and turned his attention to a subject of purely moral interest" (Collins 179). However, I find this statement inaccurate as the subject matter of *The Cricket* goes beyond "moral interest": its questions and conclusions about women's roles inside and outside the home unmistakably join a larger debate about female agency in the Victorian era, a question many authors of the period examined in their novels to express their opinion about "social wrongs and rights." *The Cricket* indeed lacks *Oliver Twist's* dramatic and harrowing portrayal of Victorian workhouses and the mistreatment of orphans, or *Barnaby Rudge's* heavily political inspection of the Gordon Riots of 1780. Still, the novella focuses on a social issue; it sets clear social boundaries for women by forbidding them to deviate from a patriarchal norm in a fairy tale framework.

As Jack Zipes claims about the Victorian period, "the fairy tale at mid-century was a manifesto for itself and a social manifesto at the same time" (xx). In this sense, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's notion of narrative prosthesis is applicable to Dickens's work. Mitchell and Snyder explore social issues through disability and contend that "disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (49). Therefore, Bertha's blindness becomes a textual crutch that supports the narrative's metaphorical use of visual impairment, her disabled body a "potent symbolic site of literary investment" (Mitchell and Snyder 49). The Christmas books weave "urgent social questions . . . into [stories of] conversion" (Douglas-Fairhurst xxii), and one of the main figures of

conversion in the story is Bertha. Although fairy tales often center around magical transformations, Bertha's change is rooted in reality: she has to leave behind the childish, imaginative fantasy world she lives in to face her position in Victorian society as a young woman, while simultaneously comprehending her limitations as a disabled person.

Blindness in Dickens's oeuvre is not a rare phenomenon. Besides Bertha, there are two other notable characters with visual impairment: Stagg in *Barnaby Rudge* and Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, who "had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 90). Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* also loses her sight, but her blindness is only a temporary consequence of smallpox. What could have been the primary inspiration behind *The Cricket's* heroine then? The answer might lie in Dickens's *American Notes*, his travel journal that describes his journey to the United States between January and June 1842. During his trip, he visited the Perkins School for the Blind near Boston where he encountered Laura Bridgman, a pupil of the institute. "[A] girl, blind, deaf, and dumb; destitute of smell; and nearly so of taste," as described by Dickens, "a fair young creature with every human faculty, and hope, and power of goodness and affection, inclosed within her delicate frame, and but one outward sense—the sense of touch" (*Notes* 45–46). It is clear that Laura made a major impression on Dickens as he spent pages describing her life and even used her physician's written accounts to paint an accurate picture to his readers. His fascination mainly lay in Laura's education and her seemingly unearthly ability to learn hand signs and communicate through them. Nevertheless, this portrayal, however faithful, verges on the sentimental: "From the mournful ruin of such bereavement, there had slowly risen up this gentle, tender, guileless, grateful-hearted being" (46). The excessively negative metaphors used to reflect on Laura's disabled condition (as opposed to her heroism of overcoming such affliction) shows Dickens's inherent prejudice towards physical impairment and the Victorian tendency to associate bodily difference with misery, pain, or suffering. In the closing remarks of the section about Laura, Dickens addresses his readers, his presumably able-bodied audience: "Ye who have eyes and see not, and have ears and hear not; ye who are as the hypocrites of sad countenances, and disfigure your faces that ye may seem unto men to fast; learn healthy cheerfulness, and mild contentment, from the deaf, and dumb, and blind!" (58). Thus the account of meeting Laura becomes a lesson, her image an example and inspiration as Dickens "transforms the story of Bridgman's

education into a narrative of moral and spiritual rescue” (Gitter, *Bridgman* 75).

The Cricket was published three years after this visit, and it is highly probable that Dickens was inspired by Laura Bridgman when creating Bertha. For instance, Dickens’s observation from *American Notes* that “[i]t is strange to watch the faces of the blind, and see how free they are from all concealment of what is passing in their thoughts” (*Notes* 45) is woven into the narrative of *The Cricket*, as Bertha, whose emotions are constantly betrayed by her facial expressions, exclaims to her friend, “Look into my face, Dear heart, Sweet heart! . . . Read it with your beautiful eyes, and tell me if the truth is written on it” (*Cricket* 208). Unlike Laura, Bertha *can* speak and hear, but similarly to Dickens’s account of Bridgman, her blindness is used as a lesson not only for her but also for the people around her who lack perspective or misunderstand their own situations.

In traditional fairy tales, representations of disability are rarely nuanced. “Such direct insights into a [disabled] character’s psychic or emotional response to disability are nevertheless rare,” claims Ann Schmiesing, “however, the mere fact that fairy-tale characters are so shallowly described makes it all the more remarkable that their sole or primary distinguishing feature is often a disability” (14)—Victorian fairy tales, at the same time, tend to take a different approach to the portrayal of disability. When featuring a character with bodily differences, they often examine the person’s inner conflict, as well as society’s response to their physical Otherness.² As Kylee-Anne Hingston adds, “[s]everal Victorian authors used the literary fairy tale genre to negotiate the changing understanding of the disabled body and identity as well” (140).

Hingston’s use of the term “literary fairy tale” is important here. Since “fairies and fairy tales occupied the Victorian imagination, with fairy images and motifs appearing in all forms of literature and culture, from soap advertisements to realist fiction” (Hingston 139), naturally, there was a great literary interest in the genre of the fairy tale, which was “simply part of the shared vocabulary of Victorian culture” (Newton xi). Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s fairy tale collection, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children’s and Household Tales), re-edited and republished multiple times between 1812 and 1857, was greatly influential during the period³ and prompted many authors to write their own stories for children in the form of literary fairy tales, breaking with the oral folktale tradition of the Grimm collection. In many cases, these new stories relied on well-known fairy-tale tropes and clichés but were enhanced with subversive twists (see Nesbit or Craik),

which confirms Newton's claim that although "[f]airy tales may be regarded by some as the simplest of all narrative forms . . . they are in fact one of the most experimental of all nineteenth-century genres" (xviii). With so many authors writing modern fairy tales, there were many opinions as to how this genre could be reinvented. Newton calls Dickens "a defender of the fairy tale" alongside Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Ruskin, Dinah Maria Craik, and George Macdonald, who "saw it as a form implicitly moral, but spoiled by overt moralization" (x) and went against overly moralizing rewritings of classic tales in his essay, "Frauds on the Fairies."

Fairy tales were clearly important for Dickens. According to Zipes, the author was "greatly influenced by his reading of fairy tales during his youth, especially *The Arabian Nights*, *The Tales of the Genii*, *Aesop's Fables*, and individual tales such as *Little Red Riding Hood* from the collections of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm" (89). Laurence Talairach adds that Dickens "also admired Hans Christian Andersen, even inviting the Dane to stay with him, where Andersen proceeded to wear out his welcome" (25). Fairy-tale motifs and archetypes are recurring elements and figures in Dickens's oeuvre: in *David Copperfield*, Betsy Trotwood can easily be read as David's fairy godmother; *Great Expectations* begins with the age-old story of a poor boy being rewarded for his kindness by a stranger; and Fagin and Bill Sikes, the antagonists of *Oliver Twist*, prey on the titular orphan boy just like malicious storybook villains.

Such fairy-tale tropes and archetypes are frequent in Victorian fiction for adults and in texts written primarily for children. Zipes argues that the author of a literary fairy tale had dual audiences in mind: "young middle-class readers whose minds and morals they wanted to influence, and adult middle-class readers whose ideas they wanted to challenge and reform" (xi).⁴ *The Cricket on the Hearth* uses no specific fairy tale as its inspiration; instead, it is a blend of various tales and fantastical elements lifted from diverse storybooks. Unlike Dickens's later short story aimed at children, "The Magic Fishbone", *The Cricket* was clearly intended for an older audience. In spite of this, it features a number of magical figures and enchanted settings, including the Cricket and the hearth themselves.

The novella begins in the home of John and Mary (Dot) Peerybingle, a working-class married couple. The narrative style evokes the tradition of oral folktales as the narrator constantly addresses the reader, involves them in the story by making personal remarks: "you must understand" the situation (165), a strange sight "would have amused you" (172), and "Bless you, you might have understood [a conundrum] like a

book—better than some books you and I could name, perhaps” (167). From the beginning, the reader’s attention is directed to the hearth where the family can hear the Cricket’s song. It embodies security, domestic bliss, and homely peace with its chirping. The Cricket itself is never described in detail, it is just as elusive as a fairy to which it is expressly compared by John and the narrator throughout the text. At one point the hearth is referred to as “the Altar of Home” (217), which connects the Cricket to the image of Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth and the home. Moreover, the Cricket’s only physical appearance confirms its magical nature: “The Cricket on the Hearth came out into the room, and stood in Fairy shape before [John]” (216). Dot mentions that the Cricket is “sure to bring . . . good fortune. . . . It always has done so. To have a Cricket on the Hearth is the luckiest thing in all the world!” (172). As Dickens uses the word “chirp” instead of “chapter” to separate the different sections of his novella, one could say that the Cricket, resting on the hearth, functions as a constant observer and chronicler of everyday domestic life, a household fairy or a guardian angel. However, besides these otherworldly attributes, the Cricket’s actions also subtly foreshadow what is to come in the story. Its comic dispute with the personified, boiling tea kettle exposes a discord at the hearth, and the possibility of a conflict that can happen even in the happiest families. As soon as the fire dies in the hearth, symbolizing the loss of marital trust, the Cricket’s song is heard no more: “The Cricket, too, had stopped. Somehow, the room was not so cheerful as it had been. Nothing like it” (175). When these domestic troubles occur between Dot and John, Caleb and Bertha are likewise affected, which demonstrates the inherent connection between the two families.

As both the story and the characters center around the household fire, we can understand the hearth as a narrative framing device that captures the essence of the “Fairy Tale of Home.” In the second chapter (“Chirp the Second”), however, Dickens turns to a more traditional fairy-tale beginning that evokes “once upon a time”: “Caleb Plummer and his Blind Daughter lived all alone by themselves, as the Story Books say—and my blessing, with yours, to back it I hope, on the Story Books, for saying anything in this work-a-day world!” (188). In fairy tales, “these framing gestures . . . tell us that we are entering and leaving a narrative world where the supernatural is commonplace, where the rules of our ordinary world do not apply, where wishes can come true” (Wanning Harries 104). In the case of the Plummer family, this is especially true, as we are introduced to Caleb’s fantasy world invented for his daughter, which negates their

desolate working-class surroundings and his own worn appearance and old age. As an effect of Caleb's "magic of deathless, devoted love," "his poor Blind Daughter [lived] somewhere else—in an enchanted home of Caleb's furnishing, where scarcity and shabbiness were not, and trouble never entered" (*Cricket* 188). Interestingly enough, it is their Cricket that seemingly suggests this idea to the poor man, planting the idea of deceit into his heart, which later causes great distress to him and his daughter: "listening sadly to its music . . . that Spirit had inspired him with the thought that even her great deprivation might be almost changed into a blessing, and the girl made happy by these little means" (189). In reality, their house is no more than "a little cracked nutshell of a wooden house" (188). Smallness here emphasizes working-class poverty. In fairy tales, small stature is likewise associated with adversity: living in a nutshell conjures up figures like Andersen's Thumbelina, a tiny girl always getting into trouble because of her size. In Dickens's other works as well, smallness is often connected to hardship or disability; as previously noted, *David Copperfield's* Miss Mowcher and *The Old Curiosity Shop's* Mr. Quilp have dwarfism, and the *Carol's* Tiny Tim even shrinks in size because of malnourishment and his leaning on crutches. In *The Cricket*, Dot is portrayed as someone who uses prosthetic-like shoes because of her short height and small stature. In the opening scene of the first chapter, she is wearing "pattens" (wooden shoes), which can be seen as artificial body parts, adding to Dot's height: "Presently returning, less the pattens (and a good deal less, for they were tall and Mrs. Peerybingle was but short)" (156). Thus, smallness is displayed at the beginning of the story as a mild and not quite hindering form of bodily difference. Even the name "Dot" signifies smallness.

However, when introducing the novella's actual disabled character, the narrator does not reveal her name right away. Instead, he keeps referring to Bertha as the "Blind Daughter" which conjures up David Bolt's notion of nominal displacement, "the strategic setting aside of names in favor of labels" (36). In the case of disabled characters in Victorian fiction, "the name is repeatedly displaced in favor of the objectifying and infantilizing label" (Bolt 39). Furthermore, "the label *blind girl* consistently invokes a disempowered figure" (50). In fairy tales, losing one's sight is always a sign of defeat or the loss of power for female and male characters alike. In the Brother Grimms' later version of "Cinderella," the wicked stepsisters' eyes are plucked out by birds as a punishment; in "The Two Travelers" the evil shoemaker shares a similar fate for blinding a man out of jealousy; and in "Rapunzel" the prince blinds himself as a result of a suicide attempt.

Is Bertha also infantilized and disempowered? While living a lie, she is described as a “[h]appy Blind Girl . . . merry in her exultation” (*Cricket* 191). Caleb functions as an extension of Bertha’s body for she addresses him as “my eyes, my patient, willing eyes” (195). Instead of experiencing the world by touch (as Laura Bridgman would do), Bertha places her trust in her father and depends on his help and perspective. Considering that Bertha cleans the house she inhabits, one questions why she never realizes their dire economic and social circumstances and exposes her father’s lie. As Julia Miele Rodas claims, “Bertha would never feel the wetness or the cold draughts of their ill-repaired home, that she would not smell the mouldering of the beams and plaster . . . all these details and many others contribute to the sense that Bertha’s blindness incapacitates her in a sense that goes beyond seeing or not seeing” (71). While Dickens emphasizes Bertha’s ability to hear better than the other characters, he never mentions whether she has a heightened sense of smell or touch. Her blind trust in her father reads as naiveté, which marks the first instance of the novella using disability as a metaphorical device.

The tendency to read disabled beings as childlike is also apparent here, as even Bertha highlights how she is stuck in a childhood-like state because of her visual impairment: “you have had consideration for Blind Bertha, even when we two were children, or when Bertha was as much a child as ever blindness can be” (*Cricket* 208). Bertha’s age is never revealed, which further complicates this issue. In *American Notes*, Dickens remarks that “a doll she [Laura] had dressed lay near upon the ground. I took it up, and saw that she had made a green fillet such as she wore herself, and fastened it about its mimic eyes” (46). Laura’s projection of her own disabled identity onto the doll is evident from this passage. As a doll’s dressmaker, Bertha is in a similar situation: being surrounded by toys for little girls, she has a chance to find solace in the presence of make-believe disabled figures, shaped by her to her own image. In the Plummer workshop, elegant and expensive lady dolls are made with “wax limbs of perfect symmetry,” but cheap toys and “common-people” dolls have “just so many matches out of tinder-boxes, for their arms and legs . . . established in their sphere at once, beyond the possibility of getting out of it” (*Cricket* 190), which signifies the impossibility of disregarding one’s own disabled body and inferior social position.

Jenny Wren of *Our Mutual Friend* reads like a variation of Bertha as she is also a doll’s dressmaker. Jenny, whose “back’s so bad, and legs are so queer” (222), reads like a variation of Bertha. She not only makes dresses

for the dolls, but also plays with them and assigns personalities to them. For Bertha, on the other hand, dolls only mean work: “she is a life-long producer rather than a consumer of playthings” (Kanwit 37). This signifies Bertha’s distance from childhood, which highlights her ambiguous position: physically, she is able to move about, find her way around the house, and work for a living, but mentally she is like a child, stuck in an imaginary realm created by her father. On the cusp of adulthood, she wishes to take the next step and marry, without realizing that this could only be possible for her in Caleb’s dream world, not in real life. “[B]lindness is central to *The Cricket on the Hearth*, both structurally and thematically, as it invites the imaginary reordering of the real world,” states Heather Tilley (159). Nevertheless, this reordering is not possible. Before I examine why Bertha is not allowed to marry as a disabled woman, I shall take a look at her love interest, Tackleton, to analyze how the theme of blindness comes into play through his character and how this affects the narrative.

Similarly to his description of their living conditions, Caleb also paints a false image of Tackleton, their employer, to Bertha. He describes him as a kind benefactor who treats them with respect, but his real self is revealed to the readers through a fairy-tale lens: “he was a domestic Ogre, who had been living on children all his life, and was their implacable enemy” (*Cricket* 180). Bertha’s affection for him springs from Caleb’s fabrications, and she falls in love with a make-believe figure of the noble domestic hero. One could argue that this delusion does not only imply figurative blindness but also deprives Bertha of the use of her other senses: she is deaf to Tackleton’s rude remarks about her, especially to “Poor Idiot” (193).

Besides his comparison of Tackleton to an ogre as a reference to his brutal nature, the narrator gives him a physical attribute as well that places him in a fairy-tale context once more: “Did I mention that he had always one eye wide open, and one eye nearly shut; and that the one eye nearly shut was always the expressive eye?” (181). Whether or not it is Dickens’s intention to introduce the idea of the “evil eye,” he uses Tackleton’s half-closed eye as an expression of evil thoughts and intentions: “Tackleton stood looking on maliciously with the half-closed eye; which, whenever it met [Dot’s]—or caught it, for it can hardly be said to have ever met another eye: rather being a kind of trap to snatch it up—augmented her confusion in a most remarkable degree” (207). This rather unique appearance fits within the portrayal of the Grimms’ two monstrous sisters, One-Eye and Three-Eyes, who constantly torment their two-eyed sister. If we

acknowledge Tackleton as the villain of the story who envies Dot and John's harmonious marriage, it is not surprising that his main goal is to wreak havoc in the happy Peerybingle home, for which the arrival of Edward Plummer provides the perfect opportunity.

Upon coming home after spending many years in South America, Edward disguises himself to observe the woman he loves without being recognized, like the hero of the Brothers Grimm's "King Thrushbeard"; a trope used once again in the disguises of John Harmon/John Rokesmith/Julius Handford and Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*. Edward's success in avoiding detection is twofold: firstly, his disguise as the "Stranger," a poor old man who was picked up from the street in John's cart, renders him socially invisible and unimportant, as even John forgets about him when he comes home. More importantly, he is described as "stone deaf" (185), which removes him further from the central stage. His pretense of deafness allows him to listen to the people around him in secret, and thus to receive the information he is looking for. He is in the shadows, yet his view is not dimmed: through his spectacles, with "dark, bright, penetrating eyes" (176), he easily observes everyone without being seen by them. Dot, a figure of unimpaired sight, is the only one able to identify the face of the long-lost friend and help him with his mission, but Tackleton soon discovers them. Detecting Dot's secret meetings with the stranger, he accuses her of infidelity to her husband, completely misreading the situation, blinded by his own prejudices and ill-will. Observing the world through lowered eyelids has its consequences in a narrative about blindness, and the possibilities and dangers of visual deception. As the narrator confirms, Tackleton's half-shut eye is more expressive than the fully open one, which may suggest that his blindness is actually a refusal to see and acknowledge other people. Without comprehending it, Tackleton now becomes the "Poor Idiot" who cannot see what is truly happening in front of his eyes. He, however, is not alone, as even the reader is kept in the dark about the stranger's identity and Dot's mysterious contact with him until the very end of the novella. Are we to believe Tackleton's conjectures? Can we trust our own eyes?

Father-daughter relationships like that of Caleb and Bertha populate Dickens's novels, both loving depictions, as in the case of Mr. Wickfield and Agnes in *David Copperfield*, and conflicting ones, as in that of Mr. Gradgrind and Louisa in *Hard Times* or Florence and Mr. Dombey in *Dombey and Son*. The majority of these works focus on the crisis of the father figure in opposition to the daughter. "Part of the problem in assessing

Dickens's female characters lies in deciding what genre of fiction structures them, that is, what kind of work Dickens is writing: popular melodrama, realist novel, moral fairy-tale, political satire or a mixture of modes," claims Alison Milbank (80), but no matter the genre or narrative, Dickens often "finds a variety of ways to test the daughter's true worth" (Schor 72). In *The Cricket*, Caleb and John's story are quite similar in this respect. Caleb has constant fears about how Bertha will react to his lie once it is revealed, while John, being forty years older than Dot (and constantly referred to as more of her father than her husband), is concerned about Dot leaving him for someone younger, blinded by Tackleton's views. His metaphorical blindness lies in his refusal to believe his eyes and accept that his wife adores him. The question of age-gaps in marriages is revisited by Dickens in his later works with couples like Doctor Strong and Annie in *David Copperfield*, and Joe and Biddy in *Great Expectations*. In addition, his novels often demonstrate there is an "eroticization of the father-daughter bond, wherein a daughter becomes a substitute wife to her widowed father rather than merely a housekeeper" (Nelson 115), which is especially true in Bertha's story. These incestuous undertones are also rooted in fairy tales that center around father-daughter relationships. In several renditions of the "Beauty and the Beast" story, the Beast is both the double of the heroine's father and the instance of prohibition. In Perrault's "Donkey Skin" and the Grimms' "All-Kinds-of-Fur", two different versions of the same tale, a princess must flee her kingdom because her father wants her as his bride. Dickens follows this tradition with the character of Tackleton, who intends to use his wealth to force May Fielding, a young woman without prospects, to marry him. However, the other two older male characters, Caleb and John, are not villainized. Leaving the shelter of the home and the warmth of the hearth in Dickens's work can lead to catastrophic consequences. When *David Copperfield's* Little Em'ly runs away with the rakish Steerforth and ruins her reputation, her savior is her adoptive father, Daniel Peggotty.

In the same vein as "classic fairy tales reveal a situation—and therefore an identity—hitherto concealed" (Newton xxv), the last chapter of *The Cricket* includes revelations of all kinds: Edward removes his fantastic attire and is magically transformed from an old stranger into a handsome young man; John's eyes are opened to Dot's harmless secret and is reassured in her fidelity; and Caleb confesses his lies to Bertha. In order to fully understand Bertha's response, however, one needs to consider another

Dickensian father–daughter dynamic: one in which the daughter cares for the father.

Claudia Nelson’s idea of the daughter being a “substitute wife” figure summons the image of the ideal Victorian wife taking care of her ailing husband, for many young girls in Dickens’s novels act like this, or even like a mother, towards their aged parent: the “place of the daughter, particularly in a motherless household, can be managed to everyone’s advantage by placing her in a maternal position” (Zwinger 425), consequently she “substitutes in the oedipal triangle for the mother; she provides the father the perfect love a mother might provide a son” (Sadoff 55). In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Lucie Manette symbolically and physically recalls her father to life as she nurses him back to health with her constant care and love. Little Nell Trent becomes her grandfather’s guardian and guide as they navigate the English countryside in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. *The Cricket’s* Caleb, “an old man, worn with care and work, . . . a spare, dejected, thoughtful, grey-haired man” (229), appears to be an ideal candidate for the role of a father who needs to be cared for. When he articulates his fear about telling Bertha the truth, he admits, “I don’t know what she’ll think of me; I don’t know that she’ll ever *care* for her poor father afterwards” (227, emphasis added).

As suggested earlier, despite her limited agency, Bertha’s disability ambiguously places her in a position that requires care and help, hence Caleb’s misguided attempts to raise her in a pretend world. As Talia Schaffer argues, “in a good care dynamic, the roles of carer and cared-for constantly switch—but many care dynamics were not good in the nineteenth century, and they are not good now . . . disabled people may be constantly forced into the disempowering role of cared-for” (10). Taking an active step, Bertha aims to leave this childlike sphere behind. Her wish to assume the role of the carer is confirmed when she talks about the necessary and sweet duties a wife owes her husband: “To be his patient companion in infirmity and age; to be his gentle nurse in sickness, and his constant friend in suffering and sorrow; to know no weariness in working for his sake; to watch him, tend him, sit beside his bed and talk to him awake, and pray for him asleep; what privileges these would be!” (*Cricket* 197). When the truth is revealed to her, therefore, her main source of agony does not lie in learning about their poverty but in understanding that Tackleton is not a romantic option for her because of his true nature and higher social standing, and that she is denied the position of the caring wife.

Her confidence in herself, her father, and her future is completely lost, and the previously “happy Blind Girl” becomes “miserably blind” (228).

Dickens resolves her troubles quickly with a magical twist, by continuing the novella’s fairy-tale narrative. Bertha “had been but a short time in this passion of regret when the Cricket on the Hearth, unheard by all but her, began to chirp” (228). Through the Cricket’s fairy song, Bertha is reminded of the hearth of their home and the person she shares it with. Upon learning that Caleb is much older than he said he was (or at least more weary), she exclaims, “I am NOT blind, father, any longer!” (230), and “It is my sight restored. It is my sight! . . . I have been blind, and now my eyes are open. I never knew him! To think I might have died, and never truly seen the father who has been so loving to me!” (229).

Miracle cures for blindness are common in Victorian literature and fairy tales alike. Through divine intervention, Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is cured of his blindness after living an honest, Christian life, and in Gaskell’s novel, *Mary Barton*, the doctors do “something to Margaret to give her back her sight” (474). The blind prince in “Rapunzel” is likewise cured by Rapunzel’s healing tears. Amanda Leduc claims that “the prevalence of magic in fairy tales serves to reinforce the class and societal structures already in place, as well as traditional ideas of what it means to have a functional body in the world” (33). Refreshingly, Bertha’s sight is not physically restored, which breaks an ableist pattern. Nevertheless, the new “sight” she gains does solidify the already established Victorian notions about gender and social roles, as well as bodily norms.

Metaphorically, Bertha is not blind anymore, because she is able to grasp the reality of her situation, her possibilities, and limitations as a disabled woman in Victorian society. With her new perspective, she understands that she can care for her father like she would for a husband (following the tradition of many other Dickensian father–daughter couples), but essentially, Dickens does not allow her to have a husband or family of her own, possibly due to prevailing medical theories on disability, contagion, and heredity of the period. To quote Stoddard Holmes, in the Victorian age “[d]isease and heredity each presented a theoretical challenge in which insufficient knowledge was filled in by fear, anxiety, or circular logic” (62), and in medical writing, blindness in particular “is habitually written about in the context of disease (rather than in the context of accident, aging, or a host of other possible causes)” (63), becoming “a figure for disease itself” (64). It is no surprise that both Rochester and Margaret are cured of their blindness, for otherwise they could not be part of a successful romantic

union. More often than not, “disabled characters are the worker bees of the marriage plot, labouring without reward, and in many cases able to perform this labour precisely because they are always already excluded from the possibility of reward,” states Walker Gore (*Routledge Companion* 121). Bertha’s dressmaking for dolls becomes more than work: it is also a state of mock motherhood, a possibly bitter reminder that she would never be able to bear her own children.

Is this a happy ending for Bertha? Even if she loves caring for her father, can we read this closure as “living happily ever after”? In the last scene of the novella, everyone joins in a happy gathering, dancing and celebrating the newlyweds, while Bertha remains in the background, providing music to the company on her harp. As Elisabeth G. Gitter points out, “In the final scene . . . Dickens shifts the burden of punishment almost entirely onto Blind Bertha: while she remains ineligible for marriage and outside of narrative closure, Tackleton, like the other foolish old men of the story, Caleb and John, is chastened, then forgiven” (*Blind Daughter*, 680). I agree with John Paul M. Kanwit, who links this ending to the story’s opening: “Bertha’s role at the end of the novel is thus similar to that of the Cricket itself; she provides background music and symbolic goodness, but little else” (42). After completing her narrative function, her presence is needed no more: like the Cricket, her song is heard but she is invisible. This overarching theme of *The Cricket on the Hearth* is summarized by Caleb’s confession to Bertha: “The eyes you have trusted in have been false to you” (*Cricket* 228). As the story is an exploration of literal and figurative blindness within a fairy-tale framework, which offers different approaches to its central theme, this sentence can be interpreted in multiple ways in the greater context of the text: John’s vision and understanding are obscured by Tackleton’s influence; Tackleton is unable to see behind the surface; and Caleb deceives Bertha as her living eyes out of love. One could say that from a Victorian perspective, it is Bertha’s blindness that narratively represents the “Fairy Tale of Home” in the most sufficient way: on the one hand, it is a nineteenth-century parable about how a daughter should be content with tranquil domestic life, and on the other, it functions as a cautionary tale for disabled women to know their social and physical boundaries.

These aspects connect *The Cricket* to Mitchell and Snyder’s idea of the narrative prosthesis, since Bertha’s blindness and body are used as channels through which social questions can be articulated. Yet, whether it is a conscious intention or not, the novella also gives a truthful, lifelike

portrayal of blindness that goes against the familiar and prevailing sentimental and symbolic uses of visual impairment. Dickens's narrative illustrates how Bertha's disability hinders her in Victorian society, even if it is concealed with metaphors. Schmiesing suggests that when researching fictional disability, one needs to move beyond the symbolized Othered body to find the individual disabled perspective: "[r]eading disability merely as a metaphor for something else is in itself a form of erasure, because it abstracts the disabled individual and her or his impaired body" (13). I believe the figure of Bertha Plummer provides a great opportunity to do just this.

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Supported by the ÚNKP-23-3-II-DE-155 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

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Notes

1 A number of Victorian authors also feature these unusual characters as the heroes and heroines of their stories in various genres, giving them more prominent roles. Elizabeth Gaskell, for instance, connects disability with the Condition-of-England question: in her debut novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), seamstress Margaret Jennings loses her sight due to the high demand of work imposed upon her by the Industrial Revolution. Invalids like Charles Edmonstone and Margaret May in Charlotte Mary Yonge's bestsellers *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) and *The Daisy Chain* (1856) situate disability in the genre of the domestic novel. Wilkie Collins's *Hide and Seek* (1854) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent* (1860) use the transgressive sensation novel to give an account of the bodies of their disabled characters: the deaf Madonna and the mute detective, Joseph Peters, respectively. Dinah Maria Mulock Craik's works are also regularly researched for the constant use of disability in them: *Olive* (1850), for instance, is a Bildungsroman of a young woman born with a spinal deformity, while the weak and sickly narrator of *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), Phineas Fletcher, suffers from an undefined physical ailment and uses

crutches, and *The Little Lamé Prince* (1875) recounts a fairy tale about Prince Dolor and his adventures with a prosthesis-like flying cloak.

2 Prince Dolor of *The Little Lamé Prince*, for example, goes through several depressive episodes until he can accept his divergence from the physical norm. In E. Nesbit's story, "Melisande" (1901), the eponymous heroine is cursed to be bald and then goes through several extreme bodily changes in the style of Lewis Carroll's Alice, which render her life rather challenging.

3 The first English edition of the tales was published in 1823, translated by Edgar Taylor, with illustrations by George Cruikshank. As Jack Zipes notes, subsequent translations also appeared in 1839, 1846, 1849, and 1855 (xviii).

4 That is certainly true in the case of William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* (1854), a unique fairy story with a satiric edge only comprehensible by adults. *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) by Wilkie Collins and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) both reimagine the tale of Villeneuve's "Beauty and the Beast" (1740), while Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66) places Perrault's "Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper" (1697) in the context of the realist novel.

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