



## Article

# Out of Time: Disabling Normative Time in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

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**Abstract:** Responding to ableist and regimented notions of time, disabled activists and disability studies scholars alike have embraced “crip time” as a modality that better accounts for the ways disability transforms chronology. By applying this critical disability framework to depictions of time in Victorian literature, my paper reveals the generative potential of nonnormative understandings of time in two foundational and widely studied texts: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. In each text, the presence of disability allows for the resistance to and subversion of hegemonic (and genre-based) modes of temporality.

**Keywords:** crip time; temporality; disability studies; Victorian disability; Wilkie Collins; Charlotte Brontë

## 1. Introduction

Despite all of the massive societal and technological changes in the Victorian period, Lewis Mumford confidently argued that “the clock, not the steam-engine, is the key machine of the modern age” (Mumford qtd. in Zemka 2). In Victorian England, developments as varied as “the factory system, the postal service, railways, [and] the telegraph” increased the necessity of standardized and regimented measurements of the passage of time (Zemka 2012, p. 2). The shift resulted in a transition away from agrarian, nature-based modes of time and towards industrialized time which was strictly measured and regulated in the industrial public sphere.<sup>1</sup> The perceived need to measure workers' labour time in factories and to coordinate the faster-than-ever locomotive travel normalized precise methods of measuring time as a critical part of daily life. In addition to shaping the relationships between individuals, labour, and community, this change in time consciousness amplified industrialization's marginalization of disabled people. Michael Oliver confirms this amplified division, remarking that while “agriculture or small-scale industry did not preclude the great majority of disabled people from participating in the production process”, the shifting premise of time as an arbiter of individualized and regimented work, like that available in factories, prevented the full participation of many people with disabilities from their local economies and their local communities (Oliver 1990, p. 27). These shifts in time consciousness and their relation to industrialization are reflected in Victorian literature's form (as with the increase in serial publications, whose stories fit neatly into the schedules of those with limited leisure time) as well as content (as with writing about the implications of technological advancements). However, these Victorian conventions are generally examined through normative understandings of time. By applying a critical disability lens to depictions of time in Victorian literature, my paper reveals the generative potential of nonnormative understandings of time in two foundational and widely studied texts: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*.

In response to ableist notions of time, which disabled activists and disability studies scholars have argued are not accessible to or understood by all people, the grassroots idea of “crip time” has been widely embraced by disabled communities as a modality that



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better accounts for differences of lived experience.<sup>2</sup> Crip time is shaped by the subjective experiences of disabled people, and thus insists on their subjecthood. In addition to a focus on the lived experiences of disabled people, crip time provides a radical alternative to hegemonic time which focuses on productivity and on upholding societal ideals of the life course. As Ellen Samuels explains, “Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings” (Samuels 2017, n.p.). Because of its remove from normative time, crip time resists not only the ideas of capitalist productivity that often show up in connection with time (Kuppers 2014, p. 29) but also, as Alison Kafer remarks, acts in opposition to ingrained systems of oppression, “as [a] potential [tool] for thinking otherwise, [ . . . ] for mobilizing against ableism, white supremacy, patriarchy” (Kafer 2021, p. 420).<sup>3</sup> Notably, crip time can apply to people with various experiences of disability: an extra time accommodation for a neurodiverse person writing an exam is an instance of crip time, as is the planning process of someone who uses a powerchair scheduling accessible transit. Within literary representations, the presence of crip time forces the acknowledgment of disabled perspectives, and in doing so resists reductive understandings of disability which portray disabled people as vessels of “evil or lack”, or, conversely, of “pure goodness”, both of which limit the agency and complexity of disabled characters (Dolmage 2014, pp. 41, 42). Despite its usefulness as a model for understanding nonnormative time, the concept of crip time has been underutilized in literary studies. Crip time holds subversive interpretational potential when applied to the point of intersection that exists between Victorian changes in time consciousness and depictions of disability. Crip time provides a lens through which to explore a question that remains unanswered—if not unasked—in Victorian disability studies: how are understandings of disability in Victorian literature influenced by the era’s preoccupation with time? To answer this question, I rely on Lennard Davis’ arguments that “to understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body [ . . . ] normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis 1995, pp. 23–24). Davis argues that the creation of the category of normal occurred in the Victorian period: “If the lexicographical information is relevant, it is possible to date the coming into consciousness in English of an idea of ‘the norm’ over the period 1840–1860” (Davis 1995, p. 24). Although the Victorians used different language to describe people with disabilities than the language used today, the construction of a norm necessarily created a realm of “abnormal” bodies and minds. By examining the ways in which disability makes visible the construct of normalcy, I will investigate how Victorian depictions of disabled experiences of time resist and subvert normative time. My work aims to bridge the gap between the lived experiences that inform disability studies and the academic study of time in the Victorian context by comparing crip time in *Jane Eyre* to that in *The Woman in White*.

This paper’s grounding in Victorian disability studies is informed by the work of David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, whose 2013 collection *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability* is “the first time a volume on disability examines only one work” (Davis 2013, p. ix). I follow Bolt, Rodas, and Donaldson in developing an understanding of disability in the Victorian period as an outgroup created by the sharp rise in medicalization and categorization during that time. Although the personal experiences of people with mental and physical disabilities undoubtedly differ, Bolt, Rodas, and Donaldson gesture towards their entanglement in *Jane Eyre*, a connection which I extend to Victorian understandings of disability more broadly: “A close reading of *Jane Eyre* [ . . . ] reveals how the novel’s logic of physiognomy and phrenology establishes a clear link between physical impairment and mental illness: Bertha’s madness is both chronic and congenital, grounded in a family history of mental illness, while Rochester’s is acute and accidental, caused in part by physical trauma” (Bolt et al. 2013, pp. 4–5). With this expansive understanding of disability (a definition also reflected by the breadth of experiences covered by “crip time”), I turn towards work on time, including those that might only imply an analysis of time rather than make an explicit connection. For

example, works by Mark M. Hennelly, Ruth Livesy, and Sarah E. Maier each approach generic contexts with different goals, but all examine generic assertions of particular normative time courses like the coming of age in the bildungsroman and the investigative time deployed in detective fiction and other crime stories. Taken together, these sources provide a strong basis for reading genre through which I can expand generic significance to the intersection of genre with chronology. I aim to build more directly on the ways scholars like Hosanna Krienke and Ellen L. Bassuk have addressed time and disability in Victorian novels, and to expand on existing scholarship on issues of chronology and time in form and narration. For example, Krienke's approach to interpreting convalescent time in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* provides a rare example of an approach which synthesizes disability, narrative form, and ideas about time; she argues that *Bleak House* "is particularly dedicated to habituating readers to extended convalescent timescales" (Krienke 2021, p. 38). Krienke further posits that "episodes of convalescent time ask readers to value the gradual unfolding of a prolonged recuperative process over and above the likely outcome of such plots" (Krienke 2021, p. 26). In Dickens' famously long serialized novel, the slow and nonlinear progress of convalescent time is reiterated through narrative form to prioritize slow sections of healing over the idealized image of a linear, full, and finalized recovery. Similarly, Bassuk's research on the Victorian remedy known as the rest cure, and the impacts of its implementation on the (often female) patients for whom it was prescribed in life and in literature, is adjacent to Krienke's convalescent time. Bassuk focuses more closely on nonfiction literature but provides important context on the place of treatments that removed patients from their day-to-day life in exchange for a schedule of rest. Although each of these sources provide important insights into time and disability in Victorian literature, the lens of crip time, and the prioritizing of lived experiences of disability that comes with further integration of disability studies into literary analysis remains an untapped resource for reading disability and time, and revealing the hegemony inherent in normative systems of time.

## 2. Constructing Normative Time

The Victorian novels *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* establish normative time in distinct ways influenced by the times in which they are set, but in each instance, normative time is disrupted by disability.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the different times in which these novels are set place them on differentiated sides of the cultural impact that resulted from major railroad expansion in the 1830s. Although published in 1847, after the proliferation of railroads, "*Jane Eyre* looks to the stagecoach era of the 1820s, a setting located just far enough in the past to be considered historical" (Livesy 2011, p. 617). At this point, although the changes wrought by industrialization were well underway, the railroad system had not yet spread far enough to permeate all of England with to-the-minute calculations. Rather than looking at standardized measures of time (minutes, hours, years) in *Jane Eyre*, I aim to investigate the relationships between disability, hegemony, and time that are established through the narrative form of the bildungsroman. Progression through a series of normative life stages is an assumed necessity for a genre about "literary characters' self-development" (Maier 2007, p. 317). Maier's work on *Jane Eyre*'s place in the bildungsroman tradition explores the gendered aspects of this genre by positioning the bildungsromans of women and girls as a progressive extension of the conservative bildungsromans laid out for men and boys. Throughout the course of the novel, Jane progresses towards the gendered normative course of romance and typical family building—until the introduction of Bertha ruptures the linear, normative narrative of time.<sup>5</sup> Despite the lack of scholarly approaches to time in *Jane Eyre*, time's intersection with disability is powerful. In Brontë's text it is disability that makes the (chronologically) normative visible.

Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright constructs a vision of time focused on seemingly objective accounts, silencing perspectives that resist that format. Collins's novel is meticulously set in and around 1850, and Collins goes to great lengths to establish this, including editing later editions where he "changed [the date of Laura's

supposed death] to a Thursday, because a death could not be registered on a Sunday” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 583 n175). The *Woman in White* involves several references to travel by trains, which is especially significant because the need for functioning train schedules prompted increased standardization of time across geographical region, since “[i]n the late 1840s British railway companies, working in quick succession of each other, adopted Greenwich Mean Time for their operations” (Zemka 2012, p. 4). With the importance of timelines in building Hartright’s case for proving Laura’s identity, Collins demonstrates a focus on precise and measured chronology. Scholarship on *The Woman in White* rarely focuses on time itself, but scholars like Mark Hennelley, Pamela Perkins, and Mary Donaghy, who discuss Hartright’s careful investigation and construction of a narrative implicitly invoke the timeline that becomes so crucial to Hartright’s case against Sir Percival and Count Fosco. For example, Hennelley categorizes *The Woman in White* as part of the detective genre, acknowledging that the framework of an investigation necessitates “the temporal metaphor of stages” (Hennelley 1980, p. 450). Additionally, Perkins and Donaghy observe the influence of hegemony on Walter’s behaviour and perspectives by arguing that in addition to his surface-level motives of genuine care for Laura and Marian, “Walter is also defending what he believes is a harmonious and enduring social order”, much like the normative time he upholds through his investigation, and further, that “[i]t is not inconsequential that this orthodox social order serves him” (Perkins and Donaghy 1990, p. 393). By expanding on the awareness of time’s importance in this story and of Hartright’s hegemonic position, I aim to articulate the way disabled characters fit (or misfit)<sup>6</sup> into Hartright’s list of temporally arranged witness statements. Like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, the presence of disabled characters Anne and Laura—whose accounts move in nonnormative frames of time—disrupts the mode of time that Hartright works so desperately to uphold. In each of these texts, disability subverts and resists temporal expectations, providing a powerful opportunity to explore crip time in literary depictions of disability.

Applying a theory with its roots in disability studies and disabled communities to depictions of disabled people in literature enables an affirmation of the significance of disability representation and interpretation. Expanding the existing Victorian disability studies field to examine time as a realm in which norms are created and upheld produces not only the opportunity to acknowledge hegemony and ableism, but the ability to find power and resistance in disabled chronologies. In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*, narrative attempts to uphold hegemonic temporal frameworks are disrupted and resisted by crip time through the experiences and effects of disabled characters. Although each text ends with the reinstatement of normative time, the explosive influence of crip time exposes the artificial and constructed nature of chrononormativity as one more way normalcy is enforced.

### 3. (De)Constructions of Time in *Jane Eyre*

#### 3.1. Establishing Normative Time

In order for disabled chronologies to exist in opposition to the normative, the parameters of normative time must first be established. In *Jane Eyre*, hegemonic time is constructed by its naturalization—its ties to the patterns of cyclical change in nature—and also to the social expectations that occur along the course of a human life. The construction of hegemonic time in *Jane Eyre* occurs at the levels of both form and content. As a text often categorized as a bildungsroman, *Jane Eyre* is especially suited to a chronological approach concerned with social life stages. Bildungsroman novels take a particular, linear trajectory away from a culturally defined childhood towards a culturally defined adulthood. Coming of age is intrinsically impacted by social expectations, which in turn vary based on class and gender. For Jane, the bildungsroman traces development towards societal expectations associated with young, upper middle class womanhood. As Millgate notes, Jane’s progress through life stages is in part shaped by her acquisition of skills associated with “the accomplishments of a lady, [ . . . ] which will ensure her economic independence as a teacher” (Millgate 1968, p. 316). The marks of her social development are noted by

other characters, as when Bessie remarks “Oh, you are quite a lady, Miss Jane! I knew you would be: you will get on whether your relations notice you or not” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 90). In addition to the transition to the status of an educated adult woman, Jane views her employment as an accumulation of skills pointing the way to a normative working life: Jane is pleased when “The promise of a smooth career, which [her] first calm introduction to Thornfield Hall seemed to pledge, was not belied on a longer acquaintance with the place and its inmates” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 106). Further, Jane’s coming of age revolves around a central Victorian preoccupation: the marriage plot. Jane’s development as a person is tied to the awakening of her feelings for Rochester, and her progress towards marriage is an affirmation of linear, normative life stages. When Jane meets with Rochester in disguise as the fortune-teller, she reinforces the importance of marriage even as she makes a wry joke, saying that of all the stories possible to hear, “I have not much choice! They generally run on the same theme—courtship; and promise to end in the same catastrophe—marriage” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 193). Although not directly concerning time upon first examination, the bildungsroman genre (and hence, *Jane Eyre*) contains within it the makings of normative time. Kafer positions crip time as other than hegemonic time when she discusses “charting the polyrhythmic movement of crip time” (Kafer 2021, p. 415). Conversely, the measurement of time by progression through a series of events associated with different life stages reinforces a focus on nondisabled bodies and minds, framing disabled people and perceptions as incompatible with chronological normalcy. Such a focus is reinforced by the narration of Brontë’s novel, which further upholds a sequential approach to time.

Brontë’s framing of Jane’s narrative as a retrospective autobiography is a vital aspect of constructing normative time, because Jane’s narrative power allows her to present time in the ways she chooses. On one such occasion, Jane transports the reader through a significant jump in time, saying “this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 81). Despite gaps in time, Jane maintains normalcy through connecting events in a linear fashion. Jane’s explicit choice to condense parts of her narrative is only one aspect of the way her narration creates a normative time: the much subtler shifts between Jane-as-character and Jane-as-narrator also point towards a sensitivity to the separation of time into past and present. Similarly, Joan D. Peters describes a common approach to theorizing autobiographical novels as tracing a shift “towards a convergence of protagonist and narrator” (Peters 1991, p. 217, emphasis original), which suggests a linear and sequential progression. Peters’s own argument, which she contrasts with this more conventional approach to narrative discourse, also argues for “a progression, one entirely separate from, if parallel to, the verbal progression of the protagonist” (Peters 1991, p. 219). Regardless of which approach is preferred, the general observation of a progressive meaning behind the narration of *Jane Eyre* speaks to a concept of normative time on the level of narrative discourse as well as on the level of content. Therefore, Jane’s narration contributes to the establishment of a normative standard for time.

### 3.2. Disabled Alternatives to Chrononormativity

Bertha Mason’s disruption of time is expressed in ways consistent with the pre-railroad understandings of time in England: inversions of normative life stages and natural cycles. Notably, Bertha herself has been unable to participate in normative time as far as a progression of life stages. When Rochester rejects all association with her, repeatedly exclaiming “I am not married” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 296) to Jane, he neglects to recognize the underlying message of his own words: for Bertha, the rite of passage of marriage did not inevitably move towards a normative relationship course. Moreover, Bertha disrupts Jane’s progress along the course of the bildungsroman by postponing the marriage of Jane and Rochester. In fact, Bertha foreshadows this disruption when she destroys a symbol of the upcoming wedding. When Jane wakes after what she believes is a nightmare, she finds “the veil, torn from top to bottom in two halves!” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 277). Correspondingly,



Jane is acutely aware of how the revelation of Bertha disrupts her movement along the normative life course expected of her, as she asks herself

And yet, where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday?—where was her life?—where were her prospects? Jane Eyre, who had been an ardent, expectant woman—almost a bride—was a cold, solitary girl again: her life was pale, her prospects were desolate. A Christmas frost had come at midsummer: a white December storm had whirled over June; ice glazed the ripe apples, drifts crushed the blowing roses; on hay-field and corn-field lay a frozen shroud: lanes which last night blushed full of flowers, to-day were pathless with untrodden snow; and the woods, which twelve hours since waved leafy and fragrant as groves between the tropics, now spread, waste, wild, and white as pine-forests in wintry Norway. (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 287)

The disruption of Jane's life course, which turns her from "an ardent, expectant woman" to "a cold, solitary girl" is explicitly linked to the corruption of naturalized time. Jane uses descriptions of temporal abnormalities to emphasize the unnatural situation that has occurred because of Bertha's introduction: this shift in her life is "A Christmas frost" striking "at midsummer." Because of Bertha, "ice glazed the ripe apples", countering the processes of nature. Human rites of passage have also been greatly disturbed by this rupture in time: Jane the "bride" is here invoked alongside funereal imagery, like the "frozen shroud" which coats agricultural fields. The association of Bertha's disabled bodymind with a chaotic departure from normative progressions of time is reminiscent of Kafer's statement that crip time is "not just expanded but exploded" (qtd. in Price 2013, n.p.). Bertha not only explodes Jane's normative experience of time in the bildungsroman mode, but is herself removed from linear life stages.

While the progression of Jane's character development is shaped by Bertha's introduction, Bertha's personal inability to fit into the expected normative life stages further illustrates the array of experiences erased when hegemonic time is assumed and prioritized. Although her father and brother arrange a marriage for her and she passes through the ritual of a wedding, having "lavishly displayed for [Rochester's] pleasure her charms and accomplishments" (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 297), Bertha emerges from the other side not into the gradual progression of expected life stages like childrearing and aging but into a confinement that removes her from normative space and time entirely: she has been "shut up" (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 299). Rochester's passionate speech makes clear that he could never see Bertha as a wife, demonstrating how he has thrown her progression through life stages off balance as he exclaims "That is my wife [ . . . ] Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know" (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 285, emphasis original). Her subsequent isolation seems to amplify her nonnormative relationship with time, because each time she acts within Brontë's novel, she does so in the middle of the night. Additionally, although absent during the fire that destroys Thornfield, Jane learns from the barkeep that Bertha set the blaze "at dead of night" and reflects that the middle of the night "was ever the hour of fatality at Thornfield" (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 414). Bertha both exists in crip time, outside of normative life progressions, and exerts her agency in nonnormative times. Thus, Bertha inverts normative time in her own life, and her appearance in Jane's life heralds a major shift away from a typical bildungsroman.

In addition to disrupting Jane's projected bildungsroman path, Bertha's introduction transports Jane to another kind of time related to disability in Victorian fiction: what Krienke calls convalescent time. In her work on *Bleak House*, Krienke notes that across the wide range of conditions portrayed in Dickens' novel, "the novel consistently emphasizes their commonalities as traumatic experiences which require a lengthy, open-ended period of both physical and emotional recuperation" (Krienke 2021, p. 38). Jane's flight from Thornfield and subsequent stay with the Rivers family provides a clear example of an opportunity for recovery from the physical and emotional turmoil she has survived. During Jane's stay with the Rivers family, she lives, to an extent, free from the social expectations of

time. Her healing allows her a glimpse into nonnormative time, because, as Krienke writes, convalescent time encourages “readers to reject simplistic assumptions of complete recovery or intractable illness” (Krienke 2021, p. 38). In this section of *Jane Eyre*, Jane experiences physical disability. She finds herself incredibly weak and ill, as evident when she tells the cook “[A] penny will not feed me, and I have no strength to go farther” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 326). After she is taken in, Jane ties her experience to a nonnormative experience of time: in particular, her loss of time during recovery, of which she says “The recollection of about three days and nights succeeding this is very dim in my mind. I can recall some sensations felt in that interval; but few thoughts framed, and no actions performed” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 329). When Jane is nearing the end of this interlude, her awareness of time returns and becomes more precise as she reintegrates into a less isolated community, as when she notes “I left the Moor House at three o’clock” and also that “it was a journey of six-and-thirty hours” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 411). Although Jane steps outside of normative time and into a disabled mode of time in her convalescence, she still returns to continue her path towards bildungsroman resolution. Jane’s removal from normative time, although significant, is not permanent.

### 3.3. Return to Normative Time?

Jane’s progression through normative life stages is postponed by Bertha’s introduction, but it is not halted entirely: her marriage to Rochester signifies the reestablishment of the happy ending to her love story. When Jane reunites with him, a time jump brings her autobiography to its rightful (by the standards of the Victorian marriage plot) conclusion: “Reader, I married him” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 436). The conclusion of *Jane Eyre* demonstrates that Jane’s life trajectory has reconverged with normative life stage expectations. Having married, Jane jumps forward again: “I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 438), demonstrating the convergence of her narrator self and the self she writes about. The alignment of these different Janes represents a normative progress towards conclusion in narrative discourse, which restores generic normality, even as Jane’s marriage to Rochester foregrounds disability in the content of the last pages of the novel.

Because of this paper’s focus on genre-based modes of time, Rochester’s significance to my argument largely relies on his role as Jane’s husband, since their marriage concludes the coming-of-age narrative disrupted by Bertha’s deviance from normative time. Although he is one of the most visible disabled characters in this text, Rochester’s temporality is less clearly subversive than Bertha’s. His disability indirectly leads to his marriage, because it facilitates the rekindling of his relationship with Jane. As is emphasized by Rochester’s willingness to accept Jane’s care, their relationship fosters an intimacy linked to his disability: he “did not like to put [his] hand into a hireling’s, but it is pleasant to feel it circled by Jane’s little fingers” (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 434).<sup>7</sup> Despite the way the marriage turns the text towards normative time, Rochester’s disabled perspective still suggests the lingering presence of *crip time* when his vision improves by a degree two years into his marriage to Jane. Although Rochester’s regained eyesight (and the miracle it is celebrated as) is certainly symptomatic of an ableist society, this moment of healing also engages with time outside of the linear. His revelation that “for some time he had fancied the obscurity clouding one eye was becoming less dense” reflects the way in which *crip time* resists “the belief that becoming disabled is a single moment, tangible, identifiable, turning life into a solid, singular, static before-and-after” (Kaufman 2021, pp. 417–18). This change in symptoms, too, recalls the function of convalescent time, especially considering that Rochester remains a disabled subject—an amputee with impaired vision—even after his eye recovers some vision. Krienke writes that convalescent time is characterized by “the unfolding development of characters’ recuperations [...] the prolonged changelessness, unexpected setbacks, and modest improvements” of a wide variety of health conditions (Krienke 2021, p. 38). Brontë’s specification that despite Rochester recovering the sight in one eye, “he cannot now see very distinctly” calls attention

to this amorphous convalescent time, in which changes to health and ability can occur without a linear trajectory towards full recovery (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 439). The restoration of Rochester's vision is emphasized through an affirmation of normative life stages in the birth of his son and heir, because "he could see that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were—large, brilliant, and black", invoking both a return to an able-bodied state that is not possible for Rochester, the role of Jane and Rochester's son in a return to temporal normalcy (Brontë [1847] 2019, p. 439).

#### 4. (De)Constructions of Time in *The Woman in White*

##### 4.1. Establishing Normative Time

While *The Woman in White* and *Jane Eyre* represent different understandings and constructions of time, each features the construction of a hegemonic approach to time which is later undermined by disability. Collins constructs the normative model of time in *The Woman in White* with the setting context of an England with a widespread railroad system, and thus an increased awareness of precise, human-governed time. As a result, the hegemonic time in *The Woman in White* is linear and meticulous. Such a regimented view of time is upheld by the legal system that frames Hartright's compilation of narratives. When Hartright asks about ways to prove Laura's identity, his legal consultant Mr. Kyrle notes that the "simplest and surest of all proofs [is] the proof by comparison of dates" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 404). The central objective of Hartright (and by extension, Marian) is obtaining the exact time and date when Laura left Blackwater park, and the prioritization of this information reinforces a mode of time that has no room for the individual variations in *crip time*.

The narrative form of *The Woman in White* contributes to the creation and upholding of its chrononormativity. Interestingly, the proliferation of serialized novels in the Victorian time period was driven by the same forces that contributed to the standardization of time. Serialized fiction and short stories gained popularity in large part due to their ability to fit into the typical day of England's increasingly literate workers. Additionally, generic considerations support the text's focus on chrononormativity: as a sensation novel, *The Woman in White* upholds the generic obsession with the written word, and specifically written forms which include dates. The written word is explicitly connected to the passage of time when the housekeeper acknowledges "we all know the difficulty, after a lapse of time, of fixing precisely on a past date, unless it has been previously written down" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 369). Fittingly, then, when pieces of writing are incorporated into Hartright's compilation, they are prioritized or discarded based on the presence of dates, a process which upholds the post-railroad focus on precision in Victorian time consciousness. For example, Mrs. Fairlie's letters regarding Anne Catherick, dated "between eleven and twelve years since" become crucial evidence to identifying the mysterious woman in white (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 92). Conversely, the avoidance of dating correspondence, as with the letters the Foscos send to Mrs. Michelson and Mr. Fairlie, is presented as cause for suspicion (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 381). *The Woman in White*'s sensation novel format uses generic conventions to uphold a normative standard of time.

Although *The Woman in White* predates the detective genre, analyzing it through a detective lens reveals overlap between the investigation plot and chronological time.<sup>8</sup> Mark Hennelly analyses Collins's novel through the stages of detective plots. In doing so, Hennelly acknowledges that reading detection in *The Woman in White* requires an acknowledgment of the "temporal metaphor of stages" (Hennelly 1980, p. 450). The plot's linear progression towards the goal of solving a mystery is a key feature of investigative stories. In addition to the temporally staged plot, the form of an investigative case further constructs an allegedly objective measure of time. Hartright's position as a kind of "general editor" (or chief detective) grants him a sense of objective authority that is patently false. As Jenny Bourne Taylor argues, Hartright is actually "claiming the neutral authority over the Law even as he reveals its interests" and further, "controls the story" all the while "[appearing] to be its passive medium" (Taylor 1988, p. 110). From his editorial position,



statements are valued based on their perceived authenticity, and much of that authenticity is derived from a normative perception of time. By appealing to authorities based on written documentation, Hartright upholds hierarchal standards of truth which depend on a linear series of events meticulously arranged by time and date, acknowledging that “when his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 50). The value placed on timelines establishes the importance of linear chronology to *The Woman in White*’s generic features.

#### 4.2. Disabled Alternatives to Chrononormativity

Anne Catherick’s disability is repeatedly associated with deviation from the regulated progression of time, revealing an instance of crip time outside the normative. From her first appearance, Anne is associated with the uncanny, in large part because of the time of day she is wandering the roads. Hartright notes the late hour as he observes Anne: “It was then nearly one o’clock” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 61). Beyond her propensity for appearing outside the hours of normative expectations for a young woman, Anne also invokes a sense of nostalgia, echoing the idea that Kafer posits in her work: “What is the crip time of remembering? Or the temporality of preparing to remember? How does one take steps now to get ready for the future moment when one will delve into the past? Recovery time is ongoing, the work is never done” (Kafer 2021, p. 423). For Anne, this remembering occurs in relation to the childhood experiences Hartright is travelling towards, as she both expresses an awareness of change—“Ah! Not my people. Mrs. Fairlie is dead; and her husband is dead” as well as a hope for the future—“their little girl may be married and gone away by this time [ . . . ] If any more are left there of that name, I only know I love them for Mrs. Fairlie’s sake” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 65). Moreover, the association between Anne’s adult life and her time with the Fairlies represents a clear tie between her disability and her perception of time. Anne’s ongoing propensity for dressing in white stems directly from her childhood promise to Mrs. Fairlie: “I will always wear white as long as I live. It will help me to remember you, ma’am, and to think that I am pleasing you still, when I go away and see you no more” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 93). Anne’s association with white is an identifying feature which has a temporal basis. Anne’s mental disability is closely linked to her status as frozen in a moment in time, linked to her happy days with Mrs. Fairlie in Limmeridge.

Laura’s disability is introduced under different circumstances than Anne’s, but it also clearly shapes her perception of time and chronology, impeding her ability to conform to regimented and ordered time. Although Laura does not have a congenital disability as Anne does, she is marked by her frailty as susceptible to illness or disease from the beginning of the narrative, where she is “in her own room, nursing that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 72). However, after Laura survives imprisonment at the asylum, her acquired disability becomes visible and her perception of time is wrenched free from linear hegemony. Marian’s immediate response upon safely removing her sister from the asylum is to attempt to construct a linear timeline, with limited success: “Miss Halcombe was able to collect such remembrances of the past as her sister’s confused and weakened memory was able to recal” (p. 389). From the normative perspectives of Marian and Hartright, Laura’s story is flawed because it does not adhere to their precise linear conventions. Rather than affirming Laura’s recollections of the traumatizing experience she has endured, Hartright notes the ways that her story does not meet chrononormative standards, because it is “presented in fragments” which are “sadly incoherent in themselves, and widely detached from each other” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 388). The emphasis here is on the failure of Laura’s story to arrange itself in a way consistent with Hartright’s aims for his collection of narratives, wherein events can be traced “from the beginning to the end of the disclosure” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 50). Laura’s nonlinear perspective reflects crip time’s power, its ability to expand past the linear. As Samuels writes, “we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear,

and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time” (Samuels 2017, n.p.). Rather than viewing Laura’s crip time as empowering or simply as a different perspective, Hartright attempts to reacquaint Laura with normative time.

#### 4.3. Return to Normative Time?

Notably, Hartright portrays himself as a competent expert in relation to Laura’s disability, resulting in a denial of her autonomy. When orchestrating Laura’s recovery from her confinement at the asylum, Hartright implements parts of a Victorian approach to patient care which would later be called the rest cure. *Although Silas Weir Mitchell had yet to create the formalized program of the rest cure at the time Collins was writing The Woman in White, the principles of his approach are visible in Hartwright’s rehabilitative actions. Of particular note is the link between physical and mental states that Mitchell used as a benchmark for recovery: “he focused primarily on a patient’s body with the belief that by rectifying visible signs of nervousness such as the loss of weight, color, and stamina, a woman, healthy in body and mind, would appear looking [ . . . ] like the front of a piece of needle-work: a discernable pattern in place and the contours of the self clearly demarcated” (Blackie 2004, p. 61).* In his recollection of Laura’s return from the asylum, Hartwright similarly connects efforts at mental recovery, like rekindling Laura’s interest in drawing with him “by her side, to guide the faltering touch, to help the feeble hand” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 397) with physical recovery aided by “the delicate strengthening food that she [Laura] required” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 397). Like the rest cure, Hartwright’s methods of patient care are inherently gendered. The rest cure, Bassuk argues, was largely implemented to address the care of women who were living with mental illnesses or disabilities, or otherwise experiencing prolonged emotional distress. Interestingly, “most patients described in the literature were nervous females” (Bassuk 1985, p. 247), who doctors believed to be more vulnerable to ailments because of the belief that women’s “nervous systems were more irritable” (Bassuk 1985, p. 251). Hartright’s possessive care of Laura after her release reflects the control-focused framework of the rest cure. Specifically, Bassuk notes that typically “the doctor promised the patient a ‘positive cure’ provided that she relinquished control to the physician” (Bassuk 1985, p. 247). Although Hartright is not a medical doctor, his view of curing Laura is grounded in medical narratives of linear progress, and this authority leads him to justify his control of Laura’s life. The rest cure operates as a removal from the rhythms of daily life, with a goal of reinstating the recovered patient into normalcy. In addition to his attempts to heal Laura, Hartright views Anne and Laura in ways which deny them agency, and thus invoke the ableist practice of infantilization as an aspect of crip time. By framing Anne and Laura as without agency and in need of rescuing, Hartright’s narrative invokes the charity model of disability, wherein disabled people are presented as “helpless, depressed, and dependent on other people for care and protection” (Retief and Letšosa 2018, p. 6). Perkins and Donaghy are similarly critical of Laura’s treatment, as they note that when “Walter asserts that she is recovering from her ordeal, and Laura herself insists that she wants to be treated as an adult, Walter continues to suggest her basic childishness” (Perkins and Donaghy 1990, p. 395). Hartright’s infantilization of Laura happens both explicitly, as when he observes “she spoke as a child might have spoken” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 400) and more subtly, in the form of taking control of Laura’s life and decisions in a way that diminishes her adult agency. Most chillingly, Hartright insists that any attempts to restore Laura’s rightful identity must be done by him and Marian alone: “Whatever sacrifices it cost, whatever long, weary, heart-breaking delays it involved, the wrong that had been inflicted on her, if mortal means could grapple it, must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help” (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 397). Hartright denies Laura even the opportunity to contribute to decisions that will shape her life, and in doing so portrays her as a child rather than an adult with input and agency.<sup>9</sup>

Hartright dismisses Anne and Laura’s experiences, equating their disabilities with falsehoods because their perceptions don’t reflect chrononormativity. Significantly, despite

the number and variety of witness statements gathered for Hartright's case, Anne and Laura's voices and accounts are absent. Moreover, when Laura verbally recounts her experiences, Hartright deems them "confused, fragmentary, and difficult to reconcile with any reasonable probability" (p. 391). The detective-style investigative standard Hartright is working within demands a clear and consecutive series of events, so when Laura "persist[s]" in asserting that she had been to Mrs. Vesey's" ([Collins \[1859–1860\] 2006](#), p. 391), Hartright seeks out authoritative confirmation. Upon learning that Mrs. Vesey does not remember a visit from Laura, Hartright declares that "[Laura's] mind, in this instance, and, as I feared, in other instances besides, confusedly presented to her something which she had only intended to do in the false light of something which she had really done" ([Collins \[1859–1860\] 2006](#), p. 398). What Hartright perceives as a failure of memory attests to Laura's ability to access *crip time* as a lens to view the world. Hartright wants Laura to remember before and after, sequences of events that line up neatly and provide clear cause and effect. In contrast, Laura's memory is more like Kafer's description of *crip time*, rejecting the stories that "rely on the straightness of linear time, the belief that becoming disabled is a single moment, tangible, identifiable, turning life into a solid, singular, static before-and-after" ([Collins \[1859–1860\] 2006](#), pp. 417–18). Laura's perception of events before the asylum is influenced by her "after", and her perceptions flow through time in a way Hartright is unable to understand and unwilling to take seriously.

Hartright's attempts to "cure" Laura attempt to place a linear narrative onto her recovery, and reenforce a "before" and "after" narrative of disability by attempting to portray Laura as returning to a version of herself that remains untouched by her traumatic experiences. Such an approach centres ableist notions that reinforce a cause and effect perspective of disability. Correspondingly, Hartright's treatment of Laura after her experiences with Sir Percival and the asylum speaks volumes about his perspectives on disability, and further serves to strengthen the link between disability and nonnormative time. When reflecting on his experiences attempting to care for Laura through her recovery, Hartright positions a broader, less linear understanding of time as an inherent failure when he says "Every little caution that Marian and I practised towards her; every little remedy we tried to strengthen and steady slowly the weakened, shaken faculties, was a fresh protest in itself against the risk of turning her mind back on the troubled and the terrible past" (p. 397). Hartright aims to prevent Laura from slipping in and out of memory and time, and instead to make Laura travel to a place before her relationship with Sir Percival, before she acquired her disability. He reflects this yearning for a "before" when he says "[t]he only events of former days which we ventured on encouraging her to recal, were the little trivial domestic events of that happy time at Limmeridge, when I first went there, and taught her to draw" ([Collins \[1859–1860\] 2006](#), p. 397). In addition to reinforcing Hartright's infantilizing view of Laura by restricting her conversation to "trivial things", Hartright expresses here his belief that there is an untouched "before" version of Laura to which she can return.

Hartright's focus on Laura's linear healing and the normative progression of their married life reveals his insistence on reinstating chrononormativity to replace the rupture of *crip time*. Hartright rejoices in what he perceives as movements towards normalcy, remarking as Laura recovers that "on her best and brightest days, she sometimes looked and spoke like the Laura of old times" ([Collins \[1859–1860\] 2006](#), p. 500). These "old times" are part of Hartright's larger narrative, wherein the normative prevails. As he concludes his narrative, Hartright makes himself visible as architect of the story and simultaneously links normativity to normative time when he says "The course of this narrative, steadily flowing on, bears me away from the morningtime of our married life, and carries me forward to the End" ([Collins \[1859–1860\] 2006](#), p. 506). Such language reflects his linear view of the experience, as well as the ways he has swept Laura up in his own life and interests. He leaves no room in his story for her disabled experiences, or for the *crip time* that continues to shape how she sees the world. Even after Hartright's efforts to "cure" her, Laura still experiences the nonnormative mode of time that she inherited as a result of her trauma: "Her memory of events, from the period of her leaving Blackwater Park to the period

of our meeting in the burialground of Limmeridge Church, was lost beyond all hope of recovery. At the slightest reference to that time, she changed and trembled still; her words became confused; her memory wandered and lost itself" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 500). Hartwright himself admits begrudgingly that "here, and here only, the traces of the past lay deep—too deep to be effaced" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 500). Even after Hartwright has solved the mystery and proven Laura's identity, his dependence on normative time cannot fully suppress Laura's crip time. After the death of Mr. Fairlie, when Marian and Laura bring Laura's son to Limmeridge House, Laura expresses a desire to explain what sent herself and Marian to the estate but falters, saying "I am afraid, love, I can only explain it by breaking through our rule, and referring to the past" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 561). This time, Marian corrects Laura, urging her instead to "[refer] to the future" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 561). Marian encourages Laura to cleave from her memories of the past and with it the crip time that shapes her life not only by suggesting a linear progression to aspire to, but also by appearing to the normative chronological process of heredity, since "this august baby" is "the Heir of Limmeridge" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, p. 561, emphasis original). Hartwright's narrative control, even as it manifests in his decision to "let Marian end our Story" with the mention of heredity, overwrites Laura's disabled perspective, but cannot exclude it entirely: the influence of crip time, like the past, lies "too deep to be effaced" (Collins [1859–1860] 2006, pp. 500, 561).

## 5. Conclusions

Brontë and Collins construct normative time in their novels on opposite temporal sides of a tremendous shift in Victorian time consciousness, but in each case, crip time disrupts the hegemonic narratives. Although each text ends with a reinstatement of normative modes of time, the presence of crip time makes visible the artificially constructed nature of chrononormativity. The approaches to time in *Jane Eyre* and in *The Woman in White* construct a normative version of time, and in doing so, create categories of time which are not effectively contained within hegemonic boundaries. The bildungsroman in *Jane Eyre* generically reflects a temporal concept grounded in nature and in expectations for human relationships that move through normative time in stages rather than specific units of days, weeks, months, or years. Conversely, the detective plot in *The Woman in White* prioritizes a sense of time that is precisely regimented and framed as objective in a way which itself upholds hegemony. Although the construction of normative time differs in these two Victorian novels, crip time serves a similar function in each. The effect of characters like Laura, Anne, and Bertha cannot be erased despite their break from linear chronologies. Crip time's power is considerable, and the intrusions of crip time in *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* make visible the construction of what is normal, even as they are corrected and silenced. At the intersection of time and disability in Victorian literature is evidence of the power of disabled perceptions to reveal what hegemony strives to keep hidden.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The agrarian "before" and industrialized "after" are variously named by different scholars like Susan Zemka, who uses the phrases "local time" and "abstract time" (Zemka 2012, p. 7). For more on conceptualizations of time in the Victorian era, see Jerome Hamilton Buckley (1966).



- <sup>2</sup> See Ellen Samuels's "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time", Margaret Price and Stephanie L. Kerschbaum's "Stories of Methodology: Interviewing Sideways, Crooked, and Crip" (Price and Kerschbaum 2016), and Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* for more on the development and definition of crip time (Kafer 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Eve Tuck advocates for similar complexity when approaching research involving marginalized communities through her proposal of "desire-based research frameworks [that] are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck 2009, p. 416).
- <sup>4</sup> Although outside of the scope of this article's focus on disability, it should be noted that crip time is not the only force through which a marginalized group resists normative time. Analyses which examine the intersections between race/racialization and time, for instance through an approach to Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, or those which examine queerness and time in the character of Marion in *The Woman in White* could provide fruitful directions for further study of chrononormativity and the subversions of it in these texts.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Millgate's fascinating argument which traces Jane's development through the progress of the skills associated with "the accomplishments of a lady" (Millgate 1968, p. 316). Millgate's focus on Jane's art provides another normative progression towards societal expectation in this text.
- <sup>6</sup> For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "fitting" and "misfitting" describe relationships between a person with disabilities and their environment, which can be harmonious or in disjunction. Interestingly, Garland-Thomson specifies that this environment encompasses "spatial and temporal aspects" (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 592, emphasis added).
- <sup>7</sup> For disability studies approaches to Jane and Rochester's relationship, see D. Christopher Gabbard's chapter "From Custodial Care to Caring Labor: The Discourse of Who Cares in *Jane Eyre*", and its excellent analysis of Jane's caregiving as well as Margaret Rose Torrell's "From India-Rubber Back to Flesh: A Reevaluation of Male Embodiment in *Jane Eyre*" and its skillful examination of Rochester's disabled embodiment in the context of Jane's desire for him.
- <sup>8</sup> My reading aligns the presentation of the detective timeline with normative modes of time, which I understand to be different from the accelerated and nonstandardized thought processes of detective figures like Sherlock Holmes, who is often read as neurodivergent.
- <sup>9</sup> Infantilization as an aspect of crip time is just one way that the life courses of disabled people diverge from the normative. Samuels articulates one part of this age displacement, writing "I swim in the warm water therapy pool at my gym, usually accompanied by men and women in their sixties and seventies and eighties. They give me sideways glances, sometimes hostile, sometimes curious: Why are you here in our space?" (Samuels 2017, n.p.). Infantilization has similar effects, and plays out in the broader world today when disabled people are assigned "mental ages" which mark them as nondisabled children rather than disabled adults.

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