Wilkie Collins, The Woman in White

Introduction to the Author: Wilkie Collins

Wilkie Collins was born in London to William John Thomas and Harriet Collins on January 8, 1824. Collins' father was a well-known painter and the family changed houses and traveled overseas often during his childhood. After a few years in school and a short period of time as an apprentice for some tea merchants, he studied law at Lincoln's Inn, "where he gained the legal knowledge that was to give him much material for his writing" (i). After the death of his father in February 1847, he published his first book, Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., RA in 1848. Unsure of what he wanted to do in life, Collins seriously considered becoming an artist and in 1849 he exhibited a painting at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition titled The Smuggler's Retreat. With the publication of his first novel, Antonina; or the Fall of Rome (1850), Collins found his calling. Charles Dickens was impressed by his work and they quickly became close friends; Charles Allston Collins, Wilkie’s younger brother, would eventually marry Kate Dickens, Charles’ sister.

Collins is mostly known for his novels, but his works also include short stories, plays, journalism, and biography. His close friend, Charles Dickens, actually acted and helped produce some of his plays. With the publication of The Woman in White (1860), Collins moved away from theater to focus more on novels that fell under the new genre he helped create: sensation fiction. After Dickens’ death in 1870, Collins “returned to the theatre, producing stage versions of his novels” (i).

Although he was a successful and popular author, “his unconventional lifestyle remained a secret from his reading public” (i). Collins never married, but he did live a woman named Caroline Graves and her daughter. He had another mistress, Martha Rudd, who he had three children with.

Unless otherwise noted, all textual references refer to The Penguin Classics edition of The Woman in White.(1)

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Portrait

Picture taken by Elliot and Fry in 1871.

Biography

Name: William Wilkie Collins
Birth: 8 January 1824
**Death:** 23 September 1889

**Publications:** Collins wrote numerous novels, short stories, and plays, occasionally collaborating with Charles Dickens and others.

- **Novels**


- **Short Stories**

  "The Last Stage Coachman" (1843), "The Twin Sisters" (1851), "A Terribly Strange Bed" (1852), *My Lady's Money* (1877)

- **Plays**

Collaborations

With Charles Dickens


Collections

*After Dark* (short stories; 1856), *My Miscellanies* (journalism; 1863), *Miss or Mrs? And Other Stories* (short stories; 1873), *The Frozen Deep and Other Stories* (short stories; 1874), *Little Novels* (short stories; 1887)

Adaptations of *The Woman in White*

*The Woman in White* is a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber based on the novel. Although it generated buzz prior to opening "for its set design, which employed the innovative use of projections rather than traditional scenery," it became "one of Lloyd Webber's shortest-running shows" after running nineteen months in London's West End and three months on Broadway.

UK television advertisement

8 Minute Preview

Additional Materials

- Read *The Woman in White* online! Versions can be found through both Project Gutenberg and Google Books.
- You can also listen to the entire novel online through LibriVox.
- *The Moonstone* is another of Wilkie Collins' great novels. The following link will redirect you to a Wiki within the UI Victorian Wiki system that has additional materials relating to *The Moonstone*:
  http://wiki.uiowa.edu/display/vicwik/The+Moonstone%2C+Wilkie+Collins

- Here is a wonderful site about Wilkie Collins including facts about his life and his work, including summaries:
  http://www.wilkie-collins.info/index.htm

- The page specific to *The Woman in White* can be found here:
  http://www.wilkie-collins.info/books_woman_white.htm

- To see a collection images of Wilkie Collins throughout his life, follow this link:
  http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/wilkieimages/wcimages.htm

- Download the game! *Victorian Mysteries: Woman in White* for the iPhone, iPod touch, or iPad on the iTunes App Store:

Artist William Dudley has created some amazing and beautiful images for the musical stage production of *The Woman in White*. Click the following links to see examples of his work, or copy and paste the URL:

- Multiple views of Limmeridge House in the summertime: http://bill-d.cgsociety.org/gallery/446203

- The boathouse used as a meeting place for the women: http://bill-d.cgsociety.org/gallery/447801/

- The asylum Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie were imprisoned: http://bill-d.cgsociety.org/gallery/460035/

- More of William Dudley's images from *The Woman in White* can be seen in his gallery including both settings from the novel and images from the musical: http://gallery.me.com/wsdudley#100376&bgcolor=black&view=grid&sel=2
### Synopsis of *The Woman in White*

"After reading the *The Woman in White*, one can never quite believe in any novel as a seamless artefact untroubled by internal contradictions. Indeed, one can never quite trust a narrator again" (xxxii) - Matthew Sweet

Warning
Spoilers below!

On a moonlit night, Walter Hartright, a drawing teacher, encounters a mysterious woman dressed entirely in white. He cannot get her out of his thoughts and his interest in her only increases as he discovers her connection to his new students: half-sisters Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie. The novel follows these characters as they try to discover the secrets of the woman in white, Anne Catherick; Laura's first husband, Sir Percival Glyde; and his close friend, Count Fosco. Filled with sinister plots, questions of identity, and set in "a recognizably modern, middle-class Victorian England," Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* is generally regarded as the first sensation novel (xiii).

This new genre rose in popularity largely due to the affordability of newspapers. Penny newspapers included multiple accounts of sensational crimes, details of marital misfortunes, and sensation stories, giving its readers thrilling adventure stories. *The Woman in White* was serialized in *All the Year Round*, a weekly magazine owned by Charles Dickens. It was enormously popular and "the progress of the plot became a dinner-table topic and bets were struck on the outcome of this or that situation" (xv). The merchandising industry took advantage of the novel’s popularity by selling paraphernalia. “Loyal fans could spray themselves with *Woman in White* perfume, wrap up in *Woman in White* cloaks and bonnets, and dance to various *Woman in White* waltzes and quadrilles” (xv).

Some of the plot of *The Woman in White* was inspired by events from Wilkie Collins’ real life. The unknown circumstances of Collins’ introduction to his mistress Caroline Graves have fed the myth “that their first encounter inspired the dramatic meeting between Walter Hartright and Anne Catherick” (xxii). An important part of the plot was inspired by a letter Collins received “asking him to take up some case of real or supposed wrongful incarceration in a lunatic asylum” (xxvii). There is another, more likely source for the story that Collins likely came across. “Clyde K. Hyder has established the most plausible source for the story as Maurice Mejan’s *Receuil des Causes Celebres*, a criminal archive that provided many of the essential events in *The Woman in White* novel (xxiii).
• **Marian Halcombe** - Laura’s half sister and chaperone. She tries to protect Laura from the schemes of Count Fosco and Sir Percival, but winds up bedridden. Later becomes Walter’s confidant and continues to hide Laura from the insane asylum. Is admired by both allies and enemies for her toughness and intelligence, but is noted for her physical unattractiveness.

> "She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression - bright, frank, and intelligent - appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete" (35).

• **Laura Fairlie** - Laura is Frederick Fairlie’s niece and starts the novel as the fiancée of Percival Glyde. Right away Walter notices a strong resemblance between Laura and the mysterious Anne Catherick. Laura grows unhappy in her marriage with Percival, as Percival goes after her money. Laura’s identity is eventually given to a dead Anne and she is mistaken for Anne and put into a mental asylum. She is able to escape with the help of Marian, and Marian, Walter, and Laura all pursue Percival in order to set things straight. They discover that Percival was an illegitimate child, and that Laura and Anne are half sisters. Laura ends the novel by marrying Walter.

> "Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir. Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine, with the one matchless look which we both remember so well. Let her voice speak the music that you once loved best, attuned as sweetly to your ear as to mine" (52).

• **Walter Hartright** - The main character of the novel. He is an artist from a rather modest upbringing. He is the first to encounter Anne Catherick early in the novel. He falls for Laura Fairlie and establishes a close relationship with Marian Holcombe. Upon Laura’s marriage, Walter travels down to Honduras. He and Marian end up in a long, mysterious venture to retrieve Laura’s identity from Anne and to discover Percival’s dark secret.

> "You are guilty of weakness and want of attention to your own best interests, but of nothing worse" (71).

• **Pesca** - An Italian whom Walter saves from drowning and subsequently befriends in events preceding the narrative. Later turns out to be a member of an Italian organization called “The Brotherhood”, which seek to install egalitarianism in that country. Informs Walter of Fosco’s connection to the movement and then turns Fosco in himself. An affable person, but somewhat melodramatic.

> "Remarkable anywhere, by his personal appearance, he was still further distinguished among the rank and file of mankind, by the harmless eccentricity of his character. The ruling idea of his life appeared to be, that he was bound to show his gratitude to the country which had afforded him an asylum and a means of subsistence, by doing his utmost to turn himself into an Englishman" (11).

• **Anne Catherick** - Laura’s look-alike, possible half-sister, and the titular ‘woman in white’. Incarcerated in an insane asylum for tormenting Sir Percival with knowledge of his secret, she escapes with the help of an unwitting Walter. From hiding, she tries to discourage Laura from marrying Sir Percival. Eventually she is captured and dies in the custody of Count Fosco, but the resemblance between her and Laura continues to perplex the narrative as their identities are switched after death. Anne has been psychologically abused throughout her life and remembers Laura’s mother as the single person who showed her great kindness, which is what compels her to help the latter’s progeny.

> "There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner: it was quiet and self-controlled, a little melancholy and a little touched by suspicion; not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life" (24).
• Sir Percival Glyde - A member of the gentry selected by Laura's father to be her husband. Initially Percival behaves gentlemanly, but darker aspects of his character become apparent after the marriage's fulfillment. When his efforts to bully his wife into transferring her wealth to him fail, he agrees to Count Fosco's plot to switch her for Anne Catherick. Walter tries to find and compel him to confess, but Sir Percival perishes in a burning church. Soon after it is revealed he was trying to destroy documentation incriminating him as a bastard son and not true heir to his estate, which is the secret he feared Anne Catherick would ruin him with.

"He has fought successfully two contested elections; and has come out of the ordeal unscathed. A man who can do that, in England, is a man whose character is established" (83).

• Count Fosco - Ostensibly a Count of the Holy Roman Empire and Austrian diplomat, Fosco's profile more properly fits the role of a fake aristocrat and spy, though he resents the accusation. He is a friend of Sir Percival's and is interested in obtaining money from Laura which he believes is owed to his wife. When Laura refuses to give Sir Percival money before consulting her lawyers, he concocts a plan to switch her and Anne Catherick. After turning Laura over to the asylum, he pursues Marian with letters warning her to take care she and Walter do not upset his plan. He has the opportunity to reveal the location of Marian's hideout, but chooses not to because he has developed romantic feelings for her. Later, when Walter discovers knowledge of his past membership to an unforgiving Italian revolutionary organization, Fosco agrees to confess the plot in exchange for keeping the money he has stolen. He goes into hiding as a French laborer, but the disguise does not stop the 'Brotherhood' from finding and killing him. His body is claimed by his wife and buried under his Fosco identity.

"This in two words: He looks like a man who would tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress” (217).

• Countess Fosco - Fosco's wife and a secretary of sorts. She rolls his cigarettes and performs other minor tasks at his request. An easygoing and liberal woman before her marriage, at Fosco's "encouragement" the Countess assumes the cool and refined demeanor expected of an aristocrat's wife. The Countess brother (Laura's father) denied her a portion of their inheritance due to his dislike of her selection of husband, and it is on those grounds Fosco justifies his and Percival's crimes. Countess Fosco pretends to be Marian's ally against Percival to lull her into a false sense of security. Lady Fosco's loyalty to the Count is so deep she has no problem deceiving her family, and tells Walter she would have killed him for blackmailing them. After the Count is assassinated, she writes a book describing his accomplishments and the honors he received, hoping to authenticate his Fosco persona for the ages.

"She is always, morning, noon, and night, in-doors and out, fair weather or foul, as cold as a statue, and as impenetrable as the stone out of which it is cut” (216).
Dependency: What is the Place of Women in Victorian Society?

*The Woman in White* emphasizes how much women in Victorian society depend on the honorable conduct of men, and the consequences dishonorable conduct has for them. When Sir Percival attempts to bully his wife into signing her fortune to him, Marian warns, “Take care how you treat your wife and how you threaten me. If you hurt a hair on Laura’s head, and if you dare interfere with my freedom, come what may, to those laws I will appeal.” (293) Rather than treat this like a threat, Sir Percival ignores her and insinuates to Count Fosco that Marian is being absurd. “What did I tell you?” he asked. “What do you say now?” Later, he and the Count successfully conspire to rob Laura, reducing her and Marian to destitution, where their only social and financial support comes from Walter Hartright, a man who, though morally superior to Sir Percival and the Count, is still a man. Count Fosco’s justification is similarly gendered, “The ten thousand pounds was a legacy left to my excellent wife by the late Mr. Fairlie. Place the affair on those grounds; and I will discuss it if you like.” (589) The law Marian insisted on is a weak defense when the dispute is left to Walter and Fosco’s arbitration.

Questions for discussion:

- The women in the novel lack effective legal power. Is there any other kind of power they can exercise?
- Does the novel critique gender inequality or just observe it?
- How do different characters respond to this inequality?

Vigilantism: Does the Woman in White endorse individual initiative over social protocols?

Anne Catherick purports herself as though she is sane while Walter escorts her from the insane asylum, so successfully that Walter decides she is merely eccentric. Nonetheless, institutions like the police and the asylum seek to recapture her, and few people question the necessity of her detainment. There is also conflict in Walter’s reunion with Laura and Marian after returning from South America. “Did no suspicion, excited by my own knowledge of Anne Catherick’s resemblance to her, cross my mind, when her face was first revealed to me? Not the shadow of a suspicion, from the moment when she lifted her veil by the side of the inscription which recorded her death.” (413) Society’s unwillingness to believe this forces him and Marian to defend Laura against the agencies trying to recapture her. In the process, Walter engages hired hands in combat and confronts Sir Percival and Count Fosco to get the information he needs. His efforts result in Laura’s restoration, suggesting there are reasons compelling enough for someone to work around or outside the law.

Questions for discussion:

- Law and order occupy important positions in the novel. Does Collins suggest doing the right thing is more important?
Is this struggle general, or does it specifically refer to private abuse of mental asylums?

In what other ways is the law manipulated?

Social Class: How does Collins juxtapose the Middle Class with the Gentry and Aristocracy?

Walter Hartright's sense of responsibility drives him to assist Anne Catherick in her escape, and afterwards agonize over whether in doing so he did right by society. When Laura's honor is at stake, he abandons any hope of marrying her. After learning about Fosco and Percival's deception, he devotes himself to uncovering the truth. In contrast, his enemies are scheming upperclassmen who advance their self-interests without considering who they hurt: Mr. Fairlie with his 'habitual want of feeling', Sir Percival in his scramble to support his fiscally unsound lifestyle, Lady Catherick's willingness to sacrifice her daughter's freedom to keep her own connections, and Count Fosco, who, for want of money, architects the theft of Laura's inheritance. The degrees Walter will go to do the moral thing are made clear when Sir Percival is trapped in a burning church. Walter abandons his past resentment and struggles to rescue him, explaining, "I remembered the horror of his situation. I felt nothing but the natural human impulse to save him from a frightful death." (516) Victorian morality applauds this simple-hearted selflessness, as it condemns the Count's code for being, much like his class, the antiquated relic of a feudal past.

Questions for discussion:

- Which class does Marian identify herself as being a part of? In which class does she actually belong?
- Count Fosco and Sir Percival are actively involved in the upperclass, but their credentials are fake. Does this remove them from the aristocracy, or imply it consists of fakes?
- Are these juxtapositions believable in a modern context?

Secrets: The presence of secrets inevitably encourages spying, which is prevalent throughout the novel. How is this technique employed to further the plot?

Perhaps the most suspenseful scene in *The Woman in White* is when Marian, fearing that Laura's livelihood may be in danger, spies on Sir Percival and Count Fosco in the dead of the night. The description that follows evokes all things menacing, as she notes the "black blinding darkness of the night" (320) and the "dark window" of the house. Marian goes on to note the "strangeness and peril" and "dread" (321) of her situation, quickly shifting to a more panic state of mind. Tensions are only heightened further when following the dialogue between Percival and Fosco in which they are seen "dropping their voices a little lower than usual" (321) and recounting the "serious crisis in (their) affairs" (322). The consolidation of the Gothic atmosphere and the apprehensive conversation between the two male villains edge the reader into an almost uncomfortable shade of panic, closely resembling Marian's situation.

Questions for discussion:

- Other than Marian, which characters play the part of a detective in the novel?
- Considering that Walter compiled all of the narratives into a single storyline, can the reader trust any of the information gathered from spying?
- Can the reader trust Walter's narratives?

The book as a trial
One theme the book maintains throughout the story is the theme of the books as a trial. Indeed, Walter Hartright describes it as such when he says, “the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of public attention in a Court of Justice” (9). There is also a large legal documentation question with the mixed up identities of Anne and Laura, an issue that would usually have to be cleared up in court. A meeting with a lawyer, Mr. Kyrie, also forces Walter to take matter into his own hands when he says, “when an English jury has to choose between plain fact, on the surface, and a long explanation under the surface, it always takes the fact, in preference to the explanation” (442). This causes Marian, Laura, and Walter to find facts rather than just rely on their story, and this leads to the resolution of the novel.

**Questions for discussion:**

- How do we see this throughout the novel?
- What are the pieces of evidence that are presented?
- How does Collins present witnesses as reliable or unreliable throughout the novel? How are these presentations similar to a real trial?

**Fate: Does the Narrative maintain an Unseen Force presides over the Lives of the Characters?**

Walter believes the story proceeds from one incident: “If I had not dived for Professor Pesca, when he lay under the water in his shingle bed, I should never, in all human probability, be connected with the story which these pages shall relate.” (13) Pesca finds employment for Walter in the Limmeridge House, where he becomes invested in Laura's welfare and, through that connection, involved in the effort to restore her identity. Walter needs information to blackmail Count Fosco into admitting his crime. Pesca is the only other Italian he knows, so he shows him Fosco to see if he can reveal anything. Pesca claims not to recognize Fosco, but when the latter spots Walter and Pesca, he turns pale and runs. Though Pesca insists he still doesn’t recognize the Count, he infers that Fosco must be a renegade member of the same revolutionary organization to which he belongs. Walter uses this information to force Fosco to come to terms. Later, at Pesca's behest, Fosco receives retribution at the hands of the Brotherhood. Both plot threads are wound around Pesca, a peripheral character. That the inception and resolution of the story and the dissemination of its justice relies on such an implausible and obscure connection implies fate oversaw these developments.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- Another plot thread that suggests fate's involvement is Anne Catherick's resemblance to Laura Glyde and their relationships to Sir Percival and each other. Does this echo the dynamics between Walter, Pesca, and Fosco?
- Characters like Walter and Marian often perceive a Gothic influence in their lives and confront it in their dreams. Is this a representation of fate?
- While some characters ultimately prosper due to fate, others, like Anne Catherick and Mr. Fairlie, seem to be sacrificed along the way. How should the audience respond to this?

**Form is Content**

“My courage was only a woman's courage, after all; and it was very near to failing me, when I thought of trusting myself, on the ground floor, at the dead of night, within reach of Sir Percival and the Count.” (319)

Marian here displays doubts of herself and her capabilities to stand up to Count Fosco and Sir Percival because she is merely a woman. However, she still keeps a journal and spies on the two, which is a rather bold action for somebody who considers herself to be weak. Collins flips the conventional roles of women being submissive to men with the character of Marian. However, Marian later becomes in trouble for her defiance of the two characters, especially after it is learned that Count Fosco has found her diary and knows her secret thoughts.
“Questions of identity, where instances of personal resemblance are concerned, are, in themselves, the hardest of all questions to settle---the hardest, even when they are free from the complications which beset the case we are now discussing.” (443)

Mr. Kyrle, the attorney filling in for Mr. Gilmore, says this to Walter Hartright while discussing the possibility of a legal case to sort out the identities of Lady Glyde and Anne Catherick. He tries to explain the difficulty in legally establishing an individual’s identity to Walter, especially when there are multiple witnesses that claim the two women’s identities are NOT mistaken. This novel struggles with the following questions: What is identity? Who defines it? Lady Glyde, whom the world believes to be dead, is the only character who actually knows if she is Lady Glyde or Anne Catherick. Because society has the testimony of numerous people that Lady Glyde is dead and buried, and that the crazy Anne Catherick believes she is Lady Glyde, her statements have zero credibility. These women looked so much alike, that even Lady Glyde’s uncle does not believe her. With all the evidence against her, Lady Glyde has to accept society’s decision that she is Anne Catherick until she can prove them wrong.

“You work and get money, Walter; and Marian helps you. Why is there nothing I can do? You will end in liking Marian better than you like me—you will, because I am so helpless! Oh, don’t, don’t, don’t treat me like a child!” (478)

Walter and Marian have had an intimate relationship since the beginning. There has been much touching, whispering, and staying up late together discussing Anne Catherick and Laura. The familiarity these two exhibit would have been viewed as inappropriate at the time this story was published considering the characters’ situation---Marian is an unmarried woman and Walter is a young man unrelated to the family.

Circumstances require that the three unmarried characters live together. At this point, Marian takes on the role of Walter’s wife, even though it has been made clear to the reader that Walter is in love with Laura and he has even considered the possibility of marrying her. Although he claims to have no attraction to Marian, he continues to seek her out for both companionship and advice. Not only do Marian and Walter give the appearance of husband and wife, but “the newly constructed household seems to feature the relation between Marian and Walter as Laura becomes the child.” (6)

This quote illustrates Laura’s sudden awareness of how close Marian and Walter have gotten. It is possible she speaks more out of fear than anything else because she has not been depicted as an aware or observant character in the novel. The way Laura begs Walter to not treat her like a child reinforces his and Marian’s decision to keep their true circumstances hidden from her.

“Just Heaven! With what inconceivable rapidity I learnt to adore that woman. At sixty, I worshiped her with the volcanic ardour of eighteen. All the gold of my rich nature was poured hopelessly at her feet. My wife – poor angel! – my wife who adores me, got nothing but the shillings and the pennies. Such is the World; such Man, such Love. What are we (ask) but puppets in a show box? Oh, omnipotent Destiny, pull our strings gently! Dance us mercifully off our miserable little stage!” (559)

Fosco’s overture of his life philosophy and confession of love for Marian. He asserts his age and marriage prevent a union between them, but celebrates his passions anyway, though he is unable to reconcile their implausibility with his carefully plotted scheme to disinherit her sister. That these cross-purposed forces exist in his soul excites him. He asserts it is a wonder of the natural order and proclaims Destiny is responsible. Fosco’s feelings put him in an awkward position, but their absurdity delights him. He refuses to forget his love even though there is a possibility it might lead to his plot’s discovery, and acts on it when he treats Marian’s illness, and again later when he chooses not to reveal her and Laura’s location to the authorities. In Fosco’s opinion, if you don’t have affections or ideals worth ruining yourself over, there’s no value to your existence. But even if you gamble your life and fortune, you still want to keep it, so Fosco ends with an appeal to destiny to have consideration for human fragility.
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This page was created by: Jessica Coon, Divya Kunapuli, Thomas Roth, and Keifer Yeoman in the fall of 2010.