

**Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White***

**Lesson: Wilkie Collins: *The Women in White***

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## Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White*



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### Life and Works

One of the most popular and prolific writers of the nineteenth century, Wilkie Collins was born on 8 January 1824 in London. He was the son of William Collins, the celebrated landscape-painter and Royal Academician. Born to an advantaged and artistic family, Collins grew up surrounded by many luminaries of late Romantic literary and art circles. Margaret Carpenter, his aunt, was a well-known portrait-painter and his mother was a cousin of the Scottish painter Alexander Geddes. John Constable, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Ruskin were regular visitors during his childhood. During his youth he fraternized with the avant- garde artists of London art world like William Powell Frith, Augustus Egg, John Everett Millais; the Dickens circle and its overlapping journalistic and literary circles; and the London theatrical scene. His exposure to these diverse artistic influences -visual, literary and theatrical- considerably enriched him and is reflected in the highly visual and intensely dramatic qualities of his oeuvre.

Although Collins's fame rests primarily on *The Woman in White* (1861) and *The Moonstone* (1868), he wrote more than twenty novels, plays, numerous short stories and many incisive and witty pieces of journalism. His reputation as the master of suspense-thrillers, who inaugurated the sensation novel and who played a key role in shaping crime fiction, remains unchallenged. His first publication was a short story 'The Last Stage Coachman'(1843). The influence of Charles Dickens is strongly evident in the story, although he gave the story a very un-Dickensian

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twist. His first novel *Iolani, or Tahiti as it was; a Romance* was rejected by publishers and remained unpublished during his lifetime. His first major publication was a two-volume biography of his father *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins Esq., RA* in 1848. He published a historical romance, *Antonia* in 1850. Later, he became an in-house writer for Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Some of his major novels are *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854), *The Dead Secret* (1857), *No Name* (1862), *Armada* (1866), *Man and Wife* (1870), *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), *The Law and the Lady* (1875). Being a theatre aficionado, his engagement with the theatre spanned his entire writing career. He wrote plays, and published highly dramatic, theatrical novels, many of which he adapted for the stage. He also exhibited a painting titled *The Smuggler's Retreat* at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1849.

Collins was extremely self-conscious about his looks and suffered from lifelong restlessness and anxiety. He was short and top heavy and had a large head with a prominent bulge on his forehead above his right eye. In the 1850s he took advantage of the prevailing mid-Victorian fashion of long beards to attempt to camouflage the striking disproportion between his upper and lower body. However his physical shortcomings, although minor, seem to have had both an oppressive as well as a liberating influence on him. His unease with his physique licensed the eccentricity, which was a lifelong cover for his unconventionality. Also, in reaction to his father's snobbery and evangelicalism, he was rebellious as a youth and had developed a kind of strategic passive resistance to stifling Victorian middle-class norms. He refused to adhere to the conventional Victorian bourgeois ideals of manhood and independence and lived with his mother until he was thirty two years old and did not have a bank account of his own until 1860, when *The Woman in White* became a spectacular success. He was very versatile and extremely hard-working. He hated formality, dressed casually, ate and drank excessively and answered only to 'Wilkie' among his friends, not to 'Collins' or 'Mr. Collins'.

His private life was shrouded in mystery. Collins was addicted to opium, which he took in the form of laudanum, due to an agonizingly painful and debilitating rheumatic illness. His domestic arrangements were quite unorthodox. He openly lived with Caroline Graves, and her daughter Harriet, after 1859. He treated Harriet like his own daughter. In 1864, he installed Martha Rudd as 'Mrs. Dawson' near his lodgings. He had three children with her. Though he maintained his two families simultaneously, he did not formally marry either of his partners. But he treated both

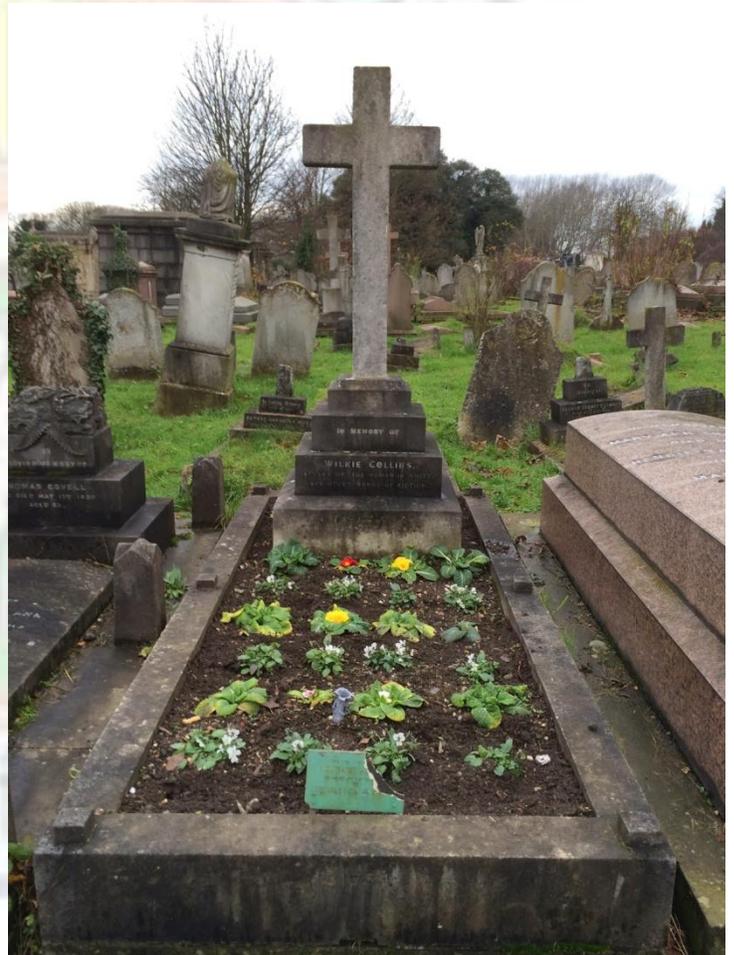
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his families equally in his will. However, his unconventional lifestyle does not imply actual bohemianism. Collins, quietly and unpretentiously, declined to play the part of either the respectable Victorian gentleman or the flamboyant bohemian. His unconventional life- choices had a direct bearing on the literature that he produced. Collins created a body of work that was innovative, lively and skeptical of established norms. However, the tempering influence of the more conservative Dickens and the professional obligations of writing in deference to public taste made him articulate his radicalism covertly. He died on 23 September 1890 following a paralytic stroke.



Where Wilkie Collins died

<http://www.wilkie-collins.info>



Collins's grave at Kensal Green

<http://deceasedonlineblog.blogspot.in>

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In 1841, Collins was apprenticed to Antrobus & Co., tea merchants, with a view to a career in the trade. However, he quit the company and entered Lincoln's inn to study for the legal profession. In the meantime, he continued to dabble in painting, writing and theatre. He was called to the bar in 1851, but he never actually practiced law. However, his legal training had a profound bearing on his writing. Most of his works, including *The Woman in White*, portray protracted engagement with, and transgressions of, legal processes. Lawyers play significant roles in his works.

Collins's life can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase, from his birth to 1851, was vital in laying the foundations for his forays into the literary, journalistic and theatrical



worlds. The second phase, his most successful one, from 1851 when he met Dickens to 1870 (the year of Dickens's death) and the third phase, the last two decades of his life, in which he focused on the theatre. Collins was a close friend, protégé and collaborator of Dickens. They collaborated extensively on literary and theatrical productions

After a lackluster beginning, his literary career took off with the serialisation of *The Woman in White* in Dickens's new magazine *All the Year Round* from 26 November 1859 to 25 August 1860. The racy serial cliffhanger electrified the Victorian reading public causing queues on publication day and raising the circulation to more than 1,00,000.

### Charles Dickens

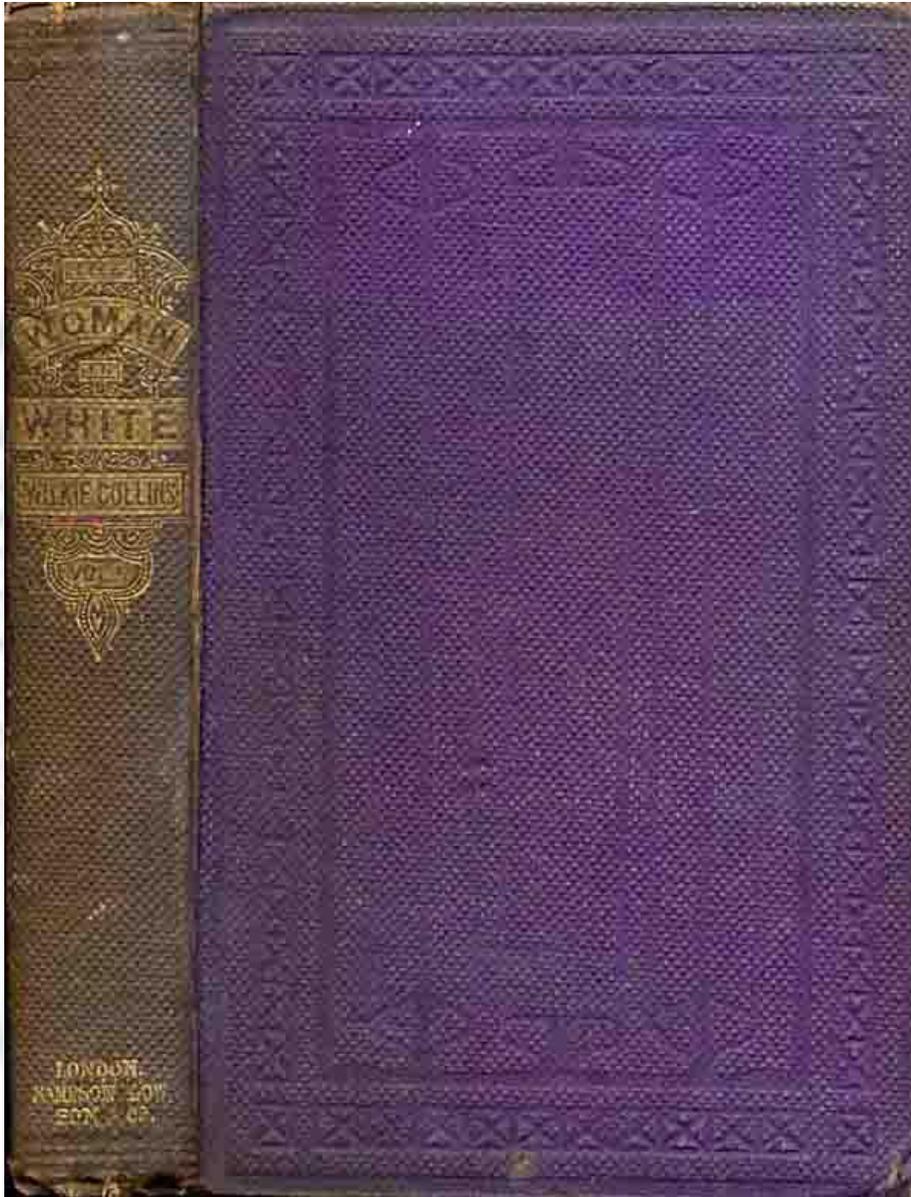
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When the novel appeared from Sampson Low in three volumes for the circulating libraries, it sold 1,350 copies within the week and received its eighth impression before the end of the year. When the single-volume edition appeared from the same publisher in April 1861, with a signed likeness of the author, Collins had

to sit several times with the photographer to keep pace with the demand. The novel was a bestseller in America as well and was rapidly translated into German, French and other European languages. Thus, Collins successfully adapted to a rapidly changing literary marketplace and was able to make use of new forms of publication and distribution at both national and international

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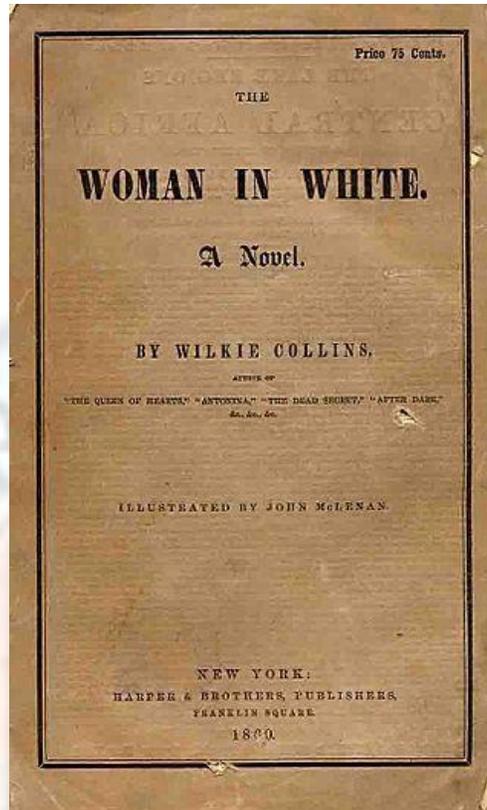
levels. The unprecedented and overwhelming success of *The Woman in White*, arguably the finest mystery-thriller in the language, established Collins as a leading novelist.



1st edition by Sampson Low in three volumes, August 1860

<http://www.wilkie-collins.info>

## Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White*



1st US edition by Harpers in paper wrappers, August 1860

<http://www.wilkie-collins>

### **Sensation Novel and its Critical Reception**

With *The Woman in White*, Collins inaugurated the sensation novel, a phenomenon associated

primarily with the 1860s. The sensation novel was a hybrid form combining Gothic melodrama with domestic realism. These subversive, middle-class narratives took crime right into the domestic sphere, the heart of Victorian society. The key sensation devices comprised of murder, blackmail, fraud, impersonation, illegitimacy, multiple secrets, seduction, adultery, bigamy, madness, wrongful incarceration, lost, concealed or forged wills. Many sensation novelists derived their plots from the newspapers of the day which reported sensational details of crimes and their detection. Murder trials, such as those of Madeleine Smith who was accused in 1857 of

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poisoning her lover by putting arsenic in his cocoa, and the sixteen-year old Constance Kent who was convicted for stabbing her four-year old brother to death, were reported in all their shocking details. Courtrooms were packed with spectators during these trials. Similarly, divorces in the wake of the reform of the divorce laws with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, aroused and fed interest in the stories of marital discord, domestic violence, adultery and intrigue for the newspaper readers of England, and provided plot motifs for sensation novelists. *The Newgate Calender* is the name given to a number of eighteenth and nineteenth century texts that comprised collections of criminal biographies and it derives from London's Newgate prison. These anthologies were expensive limiting their audience to higher social classes Their cheaper versions- *Accounts* – were published in the form of pamphlets. Satisfying the demand for similar material at the lower end of the market, even cheaper than the *Accounts*, were the broadsides and the ballad sheets for semi-literate, lower-class audience. The “penny dreadful” was a derogatory term coined by middle-class critics and applied indiscriminately to a wide range of popular crime fiction the readership of which was confined to the working class, especially young men. The entertainment factor, a heady combination of the exciting life of the criminal and the voyeuristic pleasure of reading about sensational crime and punishment, ensured that there was a ready market for such narratives. The Gothic novel of the 1790s had fostered a taste for dark passions, sinister villains, exotic locales and suspenseful plots. Then, in the 1830s and 1840s, the Newgate novels became cultural sensations. Their leading practitioners included Charles Dickens, apart from minor authors like Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Ainsworth. These novels brought crime firmly into mainstream fiction and provoked a range of class-inflected concerns from the glamorization of criminal characters to the corruption of taste among the higher-born to the leading astray of the low-born, uncultured readers to forming desires inappropriate to their station. These concerns bring into focus the question of ethics in the writing as well as the reading of crime fiction. The popularity of crime fiction contributed to the nineteenth century's anxieties about crime in reality, and was instrumental in the establishment of the new Metropolitan Police in 1829.

Collins happily admitted that he drew much of his inspiration from real crimes of the nineteenth century. He found the plot for *The Woman in White*, and some of his best plots, in a dilapidated volume of records of French crimes, Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des causes célèbres*, published in 1808. Collins is reported to have purchased a copy of it in France in 1856 and appears to have

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been inspired by the story of Adélaïde-Marie-Rogres-Lusignan de Champignelles, Marquise de Douhault, with its elements of a disputed inheritance and forced incarceration for alleged insanity. The trend continued with novels employing themes of crime and deception such as Collins's *Armadale* (1866), and *No Name* (1862), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1862), Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynn* (1862), Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863) and novels by "Ouida" and Rhoda Broughton. The sensation novel blurred class boundaries as it crucially marked the shift of crime narratives from the public space of streets and slums to the private realm of 'respectable' middle-class family. The crimes depicted in these novels were social, credible, personal, and were not committed by a criminal underclass, but by men and, scandalously, women of the middle and upper classes. Since the family home was a precious retreat, Collins and his fellow sensation novelists invited a lot of critical censure for a perceived morbid obsession with crime and for desecrating the home and the hearth. One of the leading characteristics of the sensation novel is eliciting a reaction, a strong response, a sensation-of surprise, shock, thrill-from the reader. Henry Mansel in his oft-cited 1863 review of sensation novels in *Quarterly Review* attributed the rise of the sensation novel to cultural decline, of which it was both a cause and effect. He says there is "something unspeakably disgusting in this ravenous appetite for carrion, this vulture-like instinct which smells out the newest mass of social corruption, and hurries to devour the loathsome dainty before the smell has evaporated" (Mangham, 381). In the same year, Margaret Oliphant lamented "Murder, conspiracy, robbery, fraud, are the strong colours upon the national palette" (Mangham, 381). The sensation novel attracted cross-class audience by making 'the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the drawing room' as pointed out by W. Fraser Rae (Taylor, 51). It had always been Collins's intention to be a writer for all classes. Many mid-nineteenth-century commentators saw the sensation phenomenon as a morbid symptom of modernity, the unpalatable product of a commodification of storytelling pandering to debased tastes of readers.

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### Henry James on Wilkie Collins:

To Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors.

Henry James, *Nation*, 1 (9 November 1865) 593 - 5.

The violent stimulant of serial publication -- of weekly publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident -- is the thing of all others most likely to develop the germ, and bring it to fuller and darker bearing. What Mr. Wilkie Collins has done with delicate care and laborious reticence, his followers will attempt without any such discretion.

Margaret Oliphant, *Blackwood's*, 90 (May 1862): 565 - 74.

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No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of [the sensation writer's] work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than for the fashions of the current season. A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public wants novels, and novels must be made -- so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season.

H.L. Mansel, *Quarterly Review*, 113 (April 1863): 495 - 6.

<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~mactavis/vso/reviews/reviews.htm>

The Victorian distinction between serious and popular literature accounted for the ideological bias against sensation fiction. For the dominant Anglo-American critical tradition, the sensation genre remained a critically suspect and inferior mode in comparison to "classic" Victorian realism. The readings of generations of influential critics shaped and authorised this understanding. After suffering from critical neglect for more than a century, there has been a

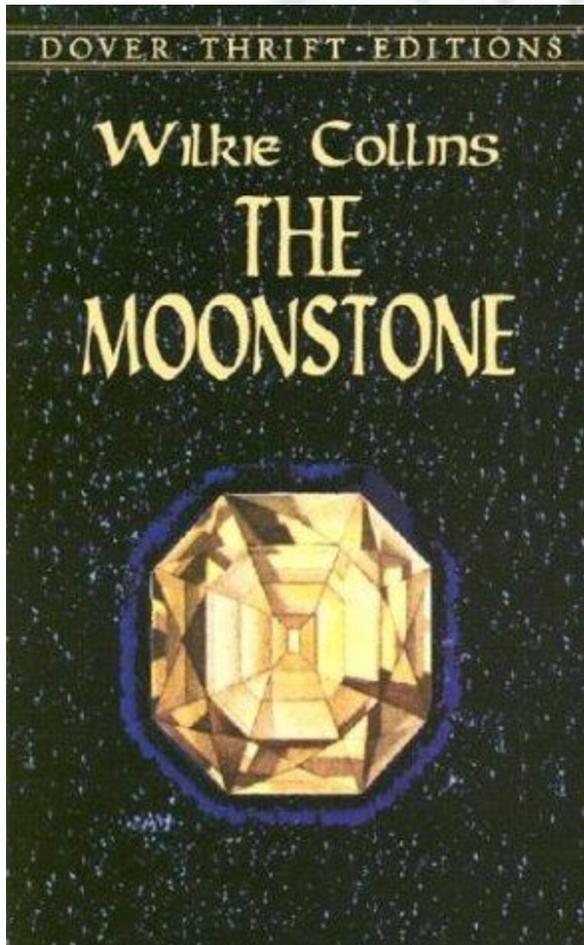
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destigmatisation of sensation fiction within the academy since the 1970s and 1980s with the expansion of the canon, a result of the cultural and intellectual upheavals of the 1960s. Scholars began to focus on cultural and gender-based interpretations of sensation novels, and they often questioned the distinction between “high” and “low” art. These novels have inspired psychoanalytical analysis and have been richly interrogated in postcolonial readings. Rather than embracing essentialist notions of class, gender, race, and imperialism, the sensation novels are now seen as engaging with these issues in a radical and subversive manner, complicating, and at times, defying them. The Debates regarding class reform also marked the period, with the 1832 and 1867 Reform Bills expanding the franchise and with liberal revolts throughout Europe in 1848 causing national tensions and fears of such uprisings within Britain. Moreover, it was an era of rapid communication in which railways, newspapers and the telegraph system changed the physical and social geography of England and transformed conceptions of time and space. In analyzing sensation texts, scholars often point to ways the narratives respond to unease about such rapid social changes and either question, subvert, or perhaps uphold conventional assumptions. After his initial, and not very successful, attempts at imitating Dickens, Collins gradually evolved his own idiom to engage with modernity. As Tim Dolin points out in “Collins’s Career and the Visual Arts”, if modernity in Dickens is externalized and melodramatised as a visible force, in Collins, “what is visible on the surface is an eerily incomplete and sometimes apparently motionless landscape, where signs of change are omnipresent but the *processes* of change are subterranean and mysterious ...The modern world looks unfinished...in a permanently suspended state of transition from the old to the new. But that cataclysmic social change has been internalised and made secret: in the entanglement of the law, the silent movements of money, the violence of marriage, and the shattering of the nerves” (Taylor,17).

While some sensation novels, notably the best sellers by Collins, Elizabeth Braddon, and Mrs. Henry Wood, have remained in print, many others which had disappeared from public view over the years, are now being reissued. In the changed scenario, there has been an explosion of interest in and a radical reassessment of Collins’s work and he has been promoted from the sub-literary margins to the centre of critical attention. Consequent upon the postmodern and poststructuralist critiques, the notion of identity has been problematised as multiple, fragmented, provisional and inherently mobile; and not stable and unified. In this light, *The Woman in White*

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offers tremendous scope and potential for addressing potent questions of identity, gender and sexuality. His work is no longer seen as merely *about* crime, but is seen as his commentary on his culture's obsession with crime. It is increasingly becoming a lens for engaging with the deepest cultural concerns and anxieties of his age. Moreover, with the collapsing of the generic boundaries and the blurring of the distinctions between "popular" and "high" art, Collins has been canonised both as a popular *and* a serious writer.



### *The Moonstone*

Valorised as the first and the best of modern English detective novels by T.S.Eliot, *The Moonstone* has enjoyed enduring appeal since its publication in 1868. Along with *The Woman in White*, it has never been out of print and has inspired numerous theatrical, television and cinematic versions. Its complex multi-voiced narrative and endless twists and turns of the plot have continued to fascinate readers. Whether it was technically the first or the longest detective novel is open to debate. It is the work in which the author transitioned from writing in the sensation mode to inventing the modern detective novel. The detective branch of the Metropolitan Police was established in 1842. Soon, detectives began to appear in popular

fiction. Sergeant Cuff is said to be modelled on Inspector Whicher, one of the earliest and most celebrated detectives of the London Police whose exploits made him famous and were fictionalised in *Household Words*. *The Moonstone* was a watershed moment in the evolution of detective fiction because it is the first novel to convincingly demonstrate the emergence of the modern fields of forensic science and criminology.

<http://3.bp.blogspot.com>

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In 1841, Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective genius Chevalier Dupin, who is a master of observation, logic, intuition and esoteric knowledge, and is the direct predecessor of detectives invented by Collins, Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie. Dupin made the bodies of the victims and the criminal tell their own tale. In this he provides a hermeneutic precedent for the long line of popular detectives who would solve cases that no one else could because they possessed specialised knowledge. With the appearance of the detective figure, the criminal was no longer the subject of the narrative, but the object of the detective's pursuit, and the fact that the detective was on the side of the law made reading about crime respectable as well as suggested its containment.

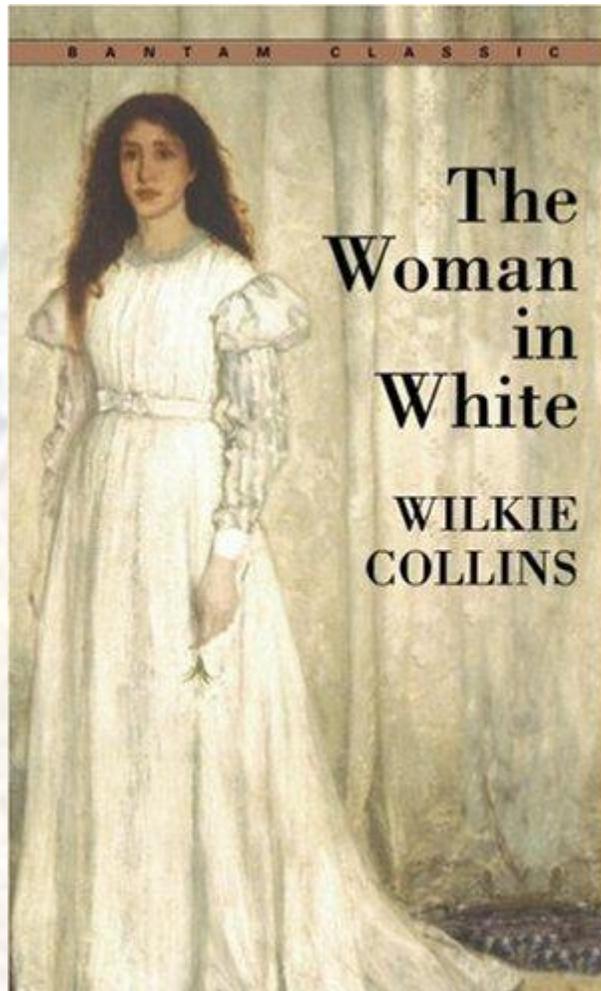
The plot of the novel focuses on the sensational disappearance of the Moonstone. Interestingly, the mystery is not solved either by the inept local police officer, Mr. Seagrave, or the celebrated detective from London, Sergeant Cuff. As the 'detective fever' spreads from the protagonist Franklin Blake to the family steward Betteredge, to the domestic (and former thief) Rosanna Spearman, to the family lawyer Matthew Bruff, to the colonial explorer Mr. Murthwaite, to the mysterious Indian trio who seek to restore the sacred Moonstone to its rightful place, the mystery thickens to exploding point. Ultimately, the honour of solving the case goes to a controversial scientist and physician, the mysterious Ezra Jennings. His bold experiment, focusing on the body of the suspect as a text to be read, is based on cutting edge research and theory in forensic science, and involves a complex chain of physical, psychological and chemical interactions. In this, Collins anticipates the *modus operandi* employed by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes at the height of the detective genre's popularity at the century's end.

### ***The Woman in White***

*The Woman in White* was an unprecedented commercial sensation. It generated what John Sutherland calls "a sales mania and a merchandise boom"(vii). Bonnets and cloaks, waltzes and quadrilles, and even a perfume were named after it. Eminent men of letters, and not just the general public, were enthralled by it. Thackeray sat up all night to finish it. Later, T.S. Eliot called it Collins's best novel, while commending *The Moonstone* as the first and the greatest of English detective fiction. However, he qualified his appreciation with the remark that Collins had the talent sans the genius of Dickens. Dorothy Sayers deeply admired and emulated his skillful

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construction of complex plots, his descriptive verbal painting, his attention to detail and accuracy and his gift of characterisation.



<https://www.google.co.in/search?q=wilkie+collins+the+woman+in+white&tbm>

*The Woman in White* has a complexly layered narrative made up of a variety of texts and voices. Its plot pivots on domestic mysteries and terrors of the English country house. Some key Gothic tropes are employed such as the ‘foreign’ villain Count Fosco, incarceration of heroines, hints of the supernatural and the uncanny in the atmosphere, madness, dreams and coincidences etc. A pall of gloom and doom hangs over the narrative. The heart-stopping and blood-chilling encounter between Walter Hartright and the enigmatic ‘woman in white’ sets the tone of the novel: “in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me...as if it had at that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven-stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed

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from head to foot in white garments”(20). Two questions drive the narrative - who is the woman in white and what is her secret? The breathless pace of the novel with its deft manipulation of suspense, encouraged by the weekly number, kept the audience riveted. The plot is centered on the disruption of domestic stability due to a series of interconnected secrets and deceptions. When Sir Percival Glyde’s mercenary motive in marrying Laura Fairlie fails him to access her wealth, he resorts to the sinister identity-substitution plot, under the guidance of the maleficent, but seductively charming, Count Fosco, exploiting the resemblance between Laura and Anne Catherick. The deception is facilitated by a family secret. Attempts to uncover Anne’s secret and the counter- attempts at its obfuscation lead to other deceptions and to the unravelling of other secrets. Skeletons tumble out of ‘respectable’ families’ cupboards. Anne turns out to be Laura’s illegitimate half-sister and Glyde has legitimised his illegitimate birth by tampering with church records. The techniques and tropes deployed by Collins provided templates and became standard sensational fare. In *The Woman in White*, he brilliantly deploys the multiple narrative method, wherein more than ten characters are mobilized to contribute to the narrative in the form of their eye-witness accounts, letters, diary-entries, personal statements. The narrators act like witnesses before a judge in a courtroom. This clever and complex technique imbues the narrative with a sense of immediacy and credibility as well as enhances the suspense of the plot. At the same time, Collins deliberately disorientates the reader, in the absence of an omniscient narrator, making it difficult to ascertain which narrators are reliable and which are not, thereby complicating the notion of authenticity and truth. He also makes deft use of his legal training to add legalese to the novel. The novel enacts a performative dialogism as the terms of the narrator-audience relationship are renegotiated. In a critique of the Law, Walter seeks the reader’s intervention as a judge as the Law has proved itself inadequate to the task.

Apart from being multi-voiced, the novel is also highly self-reflexive as Walter Hartright, the chief narrator, arranger, organizer and editor goes about delineating his agenda of reclaiming Laura’s identity and its public validation. The narcissistic and vainglorious Count Fosco is actually shown in action-writing, arranging, revising, reading and even boastfully commending his “literary composition” as a “remarkable document”(688).

The novel revolves round the question of identity. It is a narrative of the loss and the recovery of Laura’s identity. She is a stereotypical heroine- blonde, beautiful, passive and vulnerable- duped into a mercenary marriage by the impoverished, and the stereotypically villainous, Percival

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Glyde. The switching of her identity with Anne Catherick's, her institutionalization and the consequent mental breakdown testify to the fragility of identity. The physical and psychic changes inscribed upon her person by her traumatic experience render her unrecognizable to all, barring Marian Halcombe and Hartright. One of the key motifs in Collins's writing is the vulnerability and interchangeableness of human identity. People are not what they appear to be. Identity becomes a kind of performance, behind which lies a secret that cannot be revealed. The secret of Glyde is his illegitimacy: "he was not Sir Percival Glyde at all, that he had no more claim to the baronetcy and to Blackwater Park than the poor labourer who worked on the estate"(587). Laura cannot prove her identity to her own uncle. She is "socially, morally, legally-dead" and she is stigmatised as "mad Anne Catherick, who claims the name, the place, the living personality of dead Lady Glyde"(476). Collins was fascinated by states of mind and consciousness like madness, loss of memory, 'nerves', fainting etc. The trope of the double is another recurrent feature in Collins's works. Laura and Anne are literal doubles. Through their identity-swapping, the novel taps into another major concern of the Victorian age in the 1850s- the fear of insanity and the abuse of mental asylums. It offers a critique of the gendered and dehumanising treatment accorded by institutions to vulnerable people. And that, for women, the divide between safety and danger, freedom and confinement, sanity and insanity, respectability and criminality is a tenuous one and is secured only by their conformity to the norms of family and marriage.

Various critics have remarked on how the novel enacts the complex interplay of radical subversion and containment. For instance, Collins delineates marriage as a potential site of conflict as well as a means of resolution at a time in the 1850s and 1860s when marriage was being reassessed as a legal contract. Collins's engagement with 'the woman question' is evident in the novel's critique of the institution of marriage, especially when it is a loveless, arranged marriage. The vulnerability of women due to flawed marriage and property laws, which were actually in the process of change, is another recurring theme in Collins's writing. The selfish, self indulgent and irresponsible Fredrick Fairlie fails to safeguard Laura's interests despite the family solicitor Gilmore's advice. Whereas, in *The Moonstone*, Lady Verinder plays a proactive role in protecting her daughter Rachel against unscrupulous and mercenary suitors through suitable legal provisions. Laura's incarceration in a mental asylum follows her incarceration within the institution of marriage. However, the critique is contained and rendered ambiguous when it is

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articulated by the master-criminal Count Fosco: “You marry the poor man whom you love, Mouse, and one half of your poor friends pity, and the other half blame you. And now, on the contrary, you sell yourself for gold to a man you don’t care for, and all your friends rejoice over you, and a minister of public worship sanctions the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains and smiles and smirks at your table afterwards...”(269).

The sensation novel created a discursive space for the amateur detective and, interestingly, the role was not confined to the male. Marian, with her courage, strength and ingenuity, displays remarkable sleuthing skills until she is incapacitated due to illness. As an unconventional and transgressive female character, Marian spiritedly joins hands with Walter to unravel the mystery of Anne, engages in a battle of wits with Count Fosco (winning his admiration in the process) and strategizes with Walter to reclaim Laura’s identity. In another demonstration of his strategy of subversion and compromise, the fiery, passionate, courageous and resourceful Marian Halcombe, who had assured Walter “you have got a woman for your ally. Under such conditions success is certain, sooner or later”(51), chafes against the socially enforced gender norms: “Being, however nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life”(225). Marian’s diary, though an act of female agency, is mediated through Walter Hartright and, in the ultimate analysis, inscribes expectations disappointed by barriers of gender limitations rather than possibility.

Collins complicates the notion of gender as he portrays disturbingly cross-gendered androgynous male and female characters as well as conventional models of masculinity and femininity. Walter is hard put to reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of Marian’s perfectly shaped feminine figure with her startlingly masculine face. Mr. Fairlie is frail, effeminate and given to nervous prostration: “Upon the whole, he had a frail, languidly- fretful, over-refined look- something singularly and unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man, and, at the same time, something which could by no possibility have looked natural and appropriate if it had been transferred to the personal appearance of a woman”(42).

With political and social reform at issue throughout much of the Victorian era, it is not surprising that class identity is a frequent theme of sensation fiction. For example, *The Woman in White* portrays the social rise of Walter Hartright. While beginning the narrative as a poor drawing teacher, Hartright is, at the novel’s end, situated within the gentry and father to the heir of Limmeridge House. His metamorphosis from a weak, vacillating and traumatized man with a

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shaky gendered and classed identity (his profession is not quite a masculine one and he is a gentleman dependant on the patronage of the wealthy) to a resolute man on a quest to reclaim Laura's identity is brought about by his life-altering experiences during his South American expedition, where he survives disease, Indian attack and shipwreck. The sleuthing skills employed by Walter paved the way for future detectives.

The sensation genre anticipates the loss of faith and the fragmentation of identity that would later characterise modernist fiction. The "crisis in masculinity" which became a hallmark of early modernism is already apparent in much sensation fiction with its strong female characters and uncertain, vacillating men. And the decentred narratives, especially in Collins's work, point ahead to postmodernism. With its characterization, narrative structure, and often subversive content, the novel invites various critical interpretations. For instance, John Sutherland and Philipp Erchinger, in alternative readings of the novel, see Walter as an unreliable narrator. In the most sinister reading of the novel, Carolyn Dever in "The Marriage Plot and its Alternatives" suggests that the novel leaves open the possibility that Laura Fairlie did in fact die. If so, Marian and Walter have fiendishly reversed the sensation plot, using Anne Catherick in order to get their hands on the dead Laura's considerable property(123). She also suggests that while the novel form demands marriage as a means of narrative closure, the conventional couple is offset by a third figure whose relationship to the hero or heroine constitutes the primary bond: "Collins's same-sex couples walk a fine line between affective convention and erotic transgression...Nowhere is this more vividly true than in the triangulated marriage that concludes *The Woman in White*...Walter and Laura enter a marriage anchored by its essential bisexuality. Providing a masculine companion for Walter and a feminine one for Laura, Marian is a full partner in this marriage of three"(Taylor,123-124).Such alternative readings resonate with contemporary audience for contesting ideologies of gendered subordination and heteronormativity.

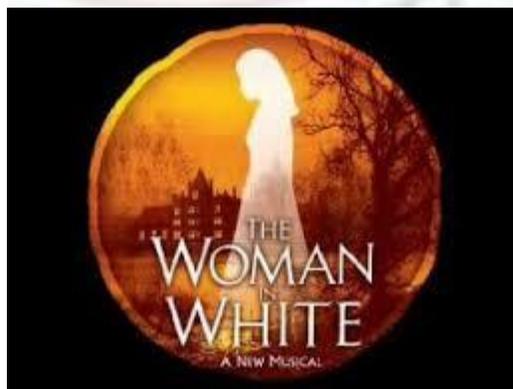
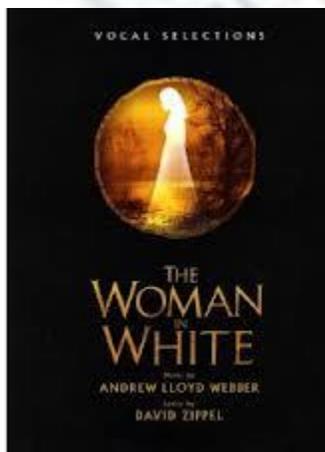
Although Collins has been critiqued for focusing on the technical sophistication of his plots at the expense of characterization, he created some of the most popular and unforgettable characters in English fiction in *The Woman in White*, especially unconventional ones, like Marian Halcombe and Count Fosco. Marian, with her indomitable protofeminist spirit, and the archvillain Count Fosco, with his devilish charm, have won over generations of audience.

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### Conclusion

Wilkie Collins incurred a lot of moral opprobrium and critical censure when he spearheaded the phenomenal wave of sensation novels. His critics were right when they insinuated that he exploited crime to create his novels. However, they underestimated the literary merits and the enduring appeal of his masterpieces in suggesting that it was the sum of his powers. His novels were about crime, but these texts offered an informed commentary on the way crime operated within the complex strands of Victorian culture. As Andrew Mangham points out, Collins uses his new style of writing as the basis for an intricate commentary on his culture's obsession with crime and for the need to look within(383).

*The Woman in White* is not only a generic hybrid, it has also transcended the boundaries of material forms. The mid-Victorian literary marketplace consisted of serialized installments in the rapidly expanding market of popular weekly magazines, the three-volume format required by the circulating libraries, and single-volume cheap reprints including yellowback (paperback) versions for sale at the new railway bookstalls. In 1871, Collins's dramatization of the novel for the Olympic theatre, after radically reworking it for stage, won considerable acclaim. Subsequently, there have been numerous and varied theatrical, filmic, radio, television adaptations facilitated by the highly visual and intensely dramatic elements of the novel. Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002), in a fascinating re-writing of the novel, explicitly develops some of the implicit themes and elements of the novel. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of Collins's *The Woman in White* premiered in London in 2004, and a \$10 million Broadway production opened in fall 2005.



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<http://www.amazon.com>

<http://youtube.com>



<http://www.theatermania.com>

<http://www.maxon.net>



<http://www.musicalworld.nl>

Visuals from Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical spectacular *The Woman in White*

The generic instability, the fragility of identity, the fragmented narrative and the strategy of critique and compromise make it impossible to pin down *The Woman in White* to a fixed set of meanings. It was Collins's magnum opus that he wanted mentioned on his tombstone. More than 150 years after its publication, it continues to enthrall audience in its multimodal avatars.

# Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White*

## Glossary

**Canon** : is a culturally valued set of texts that, by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars and teachers, are agreed to represent the “best” that the culture has produced. These texts are most kept in print, most frequently discussed by literary critics, and most likely to be anthologised and curricularised. It is subject to changes in the works that it includes.

**Gender criticism** : is based on the premise that gender is socially *constructed* and culturally enforced, and is diverse, variable and dependent on historical circumstances. Gender criticism analyses differing conceptions of gender and their role in the writing, reception, subject-matter and evaluation of literary works.

**Omniscient narrator** : is one who knows everything that needs to be known about the agents, actions and events, and has privileged access to the characters’ thoughts, feelings and motives; also that s/he is free to move at will in time and place, to shift from character to character, and to report (or conceal) their speech, doings and states of consciousness.

**Self-reflexive**: A text which incorporates into its narration reference to the process of its own composition.

**Unreliable narrator** : is one whose perception, evaluation and interpretation of the matters s/he narrates do not coincide with the opinions and norms implied by the author, and which the author expects the alert reader to share.

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