

# Subversion in the Sensation: Representation of Femininity in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

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## Abstract

This paper evaluates Wilkie Collins's novel, *The Woman in White*, as a possibly subversive text in its representation of femininity. The text purposefully blurs and confuses 'identity' which is central to the plot of the novel. This opens the possibility of rendering gender distinctions ambiguous. This is supported, quite paradoxically, by the genre-requirements of the text, being identified within the nice category of Sensation Literature. Exploiting the element of 'mystery', integral to the Sensation Fiction, Collins accomplishes multiple agendas of creating physical agitation, conspiracy, and proto-feminist possibilities. Finally, this paper employs Lyn Pykett's distinction between the 'proper' and the 'improper' femininity to assert that Collins's women only ostensibly adhere to such a division; there is ultimately a sensationalisation of gender.

**Keywords:** Femininity; Gender subversion; Sensation fiction; Wilkie Collins.

## Introduction

*The Woman in White*, already at the beginning, establishes a clear criterion to distinguish between the plot roles of its male and female characters: assigning passive qualities of "patience" and "endurance" to the Woman and making the Man as the active pursuer of resolute achievement (*TWiW* 1). However, the rest of the novel, in active defiance of its preliminary assertion, often complicates, ambiguates, reverses, and critiques such simplistic categorizing of characters according to their gender roles. Complying with the genre-requirement of sensation literature to produce both physical agitation and conspiracy, while at the same time being

commendable for its voicing of many proto-feminist ideas, Collins's novel provides an interesting blend of sensation and subversion to its readers, where both aspects simultaneously complement and contradict each other. As a social critic, Collins allows his female characters to question, transgress, and obscure norms of femininity, while as a sensation author, Collins posits his female characters as spectacles of threatening, alternate femininity who can then be safely restored to socially accepted positions after titillating his readers. This duality can be ultimately reconciled by linking it to the primary feature of sensation fiction which is the element of mystery, or the existence of something dangerous hidden beneath the tranquil surfaces, where Collins conceals the subversive potential of his novel under the structural and moral conventions of Victorian sensation literature. Patrick Brantlinger delineates the hidden nature of crime as a secretive quality present in Sensation Fiction, contributing to its mysterious appeal (1-2). This generic feature of Sensation Novels is extended by Collins to conceal his own dangerous gender politics. While, ostensibly, maintaining Victorian stereotypical classification of the ideal (proper) woman and the fallen (improper) one in the novel, Collins does not present these women in conventional ways, which renders his validation of these categories ambivalent.

### **Laura (the frail child) and Madame Fosco (the tamed shrew): The Proper Femininity**

Laura Fairlie, the designated heroine of the novel, encompasses all the virtues of accepted female propriety and respectability: as Lyn Pykett notes, the Victorian construction of "proper" woman involves "sexual passivity, chastity, purity, innocence and, above all, sexual ignorance" (16), all of which gets closely linked in the novel with Laura. Even though she is not the eponymous "woman in white", she is often associated with white clothing, which not only carries with it connotations of purity and chastity but also becomes a proof of her conscientious thinking as she attempts to downplay her class superiority, clearly stated by Walter: "Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin. It was spotlessly pure" (*TWiW* 40). This same sexual and moral purity is again reemphasized in the novel during her confession to Sir Percival Glyde, where her honest assertion of lack of any verbal or physical relation between herself and Walter again qualifies her to be representative of ideal femininity, as remarked by Marian: "Every word she had spoken had innocently betrayed her purity and truth to a man who thoroughly understood the priceless value of a pure and true woman" (*TWiW* 130). Apart from being a paragon of chastity, Laura is repeatedly valued for

her child-like innocence by Marian and Walter — for her ignorance of the conventions of the external world (142), and for her inability to hide her feelings (343) — making even her temporary madness attractive to both of them.

Yet, instead of valorising these essential female frailties of Laura, the novel exposes the danger and futility of possessing such qualities. Her passive submission to her father's wishes, considered an important female virtue, leads to the central disastrous event in the text: containing the threat of complete obliteration of her identity and self. And her almost hysterical reaction to Marian's illness makes her incompetent to save herself and her sister from the evil conspiracy of Count Fosco, which ultimately results in her complete dependence on others to battle for her cause. This makes her superfluous to the action of the plot as she is reduced to a signifier — a wronged woman from the coveted one — where her actual existence ceases to be necessary to move the plot forward and only the knowledge of her wrongs is enough to carry on the plot of retribution. Instead of suggesting as others have — such as Miller (119) and May (99-100) — that Laura is further feminized during the course of the novel to bring about the appropriate conclusion of heterosexual marriage and thus suppress any transgressive energy in the novel, I would propose that the novel indicates the ineffectiveness and vulnerability of such femininity comprised of passive subservience, worldly ignorance and child-like frailty which can be easily victimised by wicked forces.

Similarly, Madame Fosco is another candidate for representing this version of docile femininity which is taken in her case to the absurd extreme of muted femininity who can only parrot her husband's words. It is claimed in the text that marriage had transformed Madame Fosco from a fiery, assertive, and proto-feminist woman to an obediently silent wife (*TWiW* 165, 179). This change is, however, not presented in a fortuitous light as her unconditional devotion to the Count helps in further enabling the villainous scheme in the text. Madame Fosco is a parody of the Victorian expectation of a dutiful, yielding wife as she embodies the calamity of a woman's uncritical dedication and loyalty to a man. All her actions and words just reinscribe the Count's intentions and narrative, making her complicit in his crimes, which hints toward the novel's rejection of Madame Fosco's subservience as an ideal model of femininity.

**Anne (the shadowy victim) and Mrs Catherick (the fallen woman): The Improper Femininity**

Anne Catherick, the eponymous “woman in white”, is continually presented in the novel as an enigma who both readers and other characters alike try to fix, define, and confine. Her introduction also posits her as a shadowy, ghostly figure causing uncertainty and anxiety about her class position and respectability for Walter as he fails to place her in the socially defined matrix: “This was all that I could observe of her in the dim light and under the perplexingly strange circumstances of our meeting. What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess” (14). Walter’s anxiety is shared by almost every character in the novel as they try to pin her down at some point or the other in the text: the trio of Marian-Walter-Laura with almost detective-like zeal attempt to uncover the mystery of Anne, Fosco tries to stamp her as an ill Lady Glyde who can be finally constrained in a tomb, and Sir Percival Glyde wants to label her as a mad-woman incarcerated in a madhouse.

M. Kellen Williams sees Anne as a “fugitive sign” with an unstable identity who constantly evades these above-mentioned attempts to anchor her (91). Such fluid characterization opens up the possibility to read the transgressive potential of Anne: mad, illegitimate, and streetwalker. Anne’s unexpected appearance on the high-road engenders uneasiness for Walter as he questions, “What *sort* of a woman she was” (emphasis added) which carries with it undertones of prostitution for the Victorian audience. This idea is further corroborated by Anne’s own apprehension to justify her innocence as she claims: “You don’t suspect me of doing anything wrong, do you? I have done nothing wrong” (*TWiW* 15). Her presence on the street is improper is recognized by Walter, Anne, and the readers, which drives at the popular sensation fiction trope of the *othered* feminine, or “the negation of womanly norm. Sexually depraved and mentally and physically diseased, the prostitute was the bearer of contagion into the sanctuary of the middle-class home” (Pykett 63-4). Therefore, it is not surprising for any Victorian reader that, immediately after this encounter, Anne’s sanity is also put to question as madness becomes another means of characterizing deviant femininity. A stereotypical description of mad behaviour taints the following encounter of Anne by Walter:

Her face, at all ordinary times so touching to look at,...became suddenly darkened by an expression of maniacally intense hatred and fear, which communicated a wild, unnatural force to every feature. Her eyes dilated in the dim evening light, like the eyes of a wild animal. (*TWiW* 78)

This description contains the easily recognizable features of sensation-alised madness: beastly, threatening, and non-feminine. All of this is further strengthened by the idea of the professed similarity between Anne and Laura, submitting Anne as the aberrant double of Laura. Finally, the charge of illegitimacy is also placed on Anne, as she, like a true double, is eventually ostracized from the social and textual space of the novel.

However, Collins does not treat this trope conventionally, as the text, instead of creating a binary between the two half-sisters thus emphasizing their differences, hints at their proximity, not only in terms of their looks but character and situation. Not in the style of *Jane Eyre*, Anne is not the typical externalisation of all negative, transgressive aspects of the heroine, instead, she is depicted as another victim of oppressive patriarchy hounded by mental institutions and rich aristocratic men. Aligned with Laura, Anne's child-like innocence is also stressed by the novel (75) and her victimhood is also established in the text alongside Laura as they confront the same perpetrators. With such easy slippage of identity between Laura and Anne, Collins seems to suggest the hollowness of such distinctions of class, respectability, and sanity: when the "proper" and the "improper" are so seemingly close then the authenticity of the former also becomes questionable. Anne is neither a warning for Laura nor a foil to her morality, instead, as argued by Tara Macdonald, Anne is a "female imposture" who exposes the ideal of the "good Victorian wife" as a façade and artificial construction (129).

Anne's outsider status is further reinforced by her mother's status of a "fallen woman" – a woman – abandoned by her husband, shunned by society, and bearing the charge of adultery. Mrs Catherick may appear as the quintessential "fallen woman", yet, gradually, the text makes the flimsiness of such identifying marker clear: neither is she guilty of the accused crime of adultery, nor is she permanently isolated from social respectability. She refuses to be treated as a lost woman who lives defeated on the margins of society, instead, she actively exerts to keep her place in it. Instead of painting Mrs Catherick as the perverse, monstrous feminine force in the text, the blame is attributed to Sir Percival for deceiving her and society as a whole. Collins destabilizes the convenient classification of the "wronged" and the "wrong" woman, as both Anne and Mrs Catherick outwardly carry the social signs of the "improper" feminine, but both are revealed to be the victims of class snobbery (exploited by Mr Fairlie, Sir Percival Glyde, and Count Fosco collectively) and gender prejudices (socially snubbed due to imputations of depravity).

### **Marian (the mannish woman): The Liminal Femininity**

It is ultimately in the character of Marian that the subversive possibility of the text emerges more fully. Right through her introduction, it is stated that she resists simplistic gender codification, where her outward appearance blurs the lines between masculine and feminine features which generates anxiety for Walter as he feels a “helpless discomfort” — who then tries to suppress that by labelling Marian as “ugly” (*TWiW* 23). This gender fluidity is not limited to her physiognomy: her character bears traces of traditionally considered masculine behaviour which is often at odds with the social role defined for her as a woman. The novel repeatedly emphasizes Marian’s inclination towards manly pursuits, conduct, and sensibility: she prefers intellectual pastimes of “chess, backgammon, écarté” over aesthetic ones such as art or music (25), she expresses her emotional distresses in a manner similar to men (125), and she’s described to possess “foresight and resolution of a man” (252).

This conflict between her natural tendencies and the socially required ones creates an opportunity to locate a feminist intervention in the text: Marian laments on women’s lack of agency which has rendered her a “helpless, useless woman” unable to assist her sister (*TWiW* 149); she is resentful of women’s monotonous and passive existence in her stark comment on them being “condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life” (151); and, finally, she is rebelliously critical of women’s inferior positions in marriage which she describes as men taking women “body and soul to themselves” and fastening their “helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel” (138). Furthermore, Marian’s liminal gender position allows her to escape customary situations allocated to women, being free from domestic duties, marital subordination, and the transactional structure of heterosexual relations. In fact, the novel insinuates a homoerotic/homosocial bond between Marian and Laura, which again defies their reduction into Madonna-whore binary. Despite Marian’s enumeration of the differences between herself and Laura, the novel does not pit them as rivals, instead, it creates an alternate space to facilitate their mutual affection for each other which is incessantly threatened by patriarchal intrusion — a fear — couched in Marian’s apprehension: “Before another month is over our heads she will be *his* Laura instead of mine” (141). Sercan Öztekin recognizes a subversive strain in such homosexual relations as they challenge “traditional male and female identities” and signify freedom from parental/paternal authority allowing women to be “quite intimate and dependent on each other” (38-9). Such reading is useful as it suggests that the presumable lesbianism of Marian can dually

challenge gender norms: avoid behavioural expectations and hierarchical impositions of heterosexual unions.

Finally, the novel does not depict Marian as an anomaly or aberration, instead, Marian is integral to the heroic efforts commended in the text. As an adventuress, she discovers the villainous intentions of Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde and rescues Laura from her incarceration in the mental asylum; as a guiding force, she enables Walter's eventual maturity into the figure of avenger and protector; and as a saviour, she acts as a guardian to an infantilised Laura. Ann Gaylin (325) and Leila Silvana May (94), among others, have remarked on the conservative ending of the text which tames Marian into a figure of 'good angel' while displacing her sororal love and reinforcing heterosexual bonds and patriarchal authority through Walter. However, I would like to argue that like the rest of the novel Collins has successfully hidden another form of subversion under the apparently safe confines of conventionality: it is Marian who initially rejects and then ultimately gives permission to Walter to marry Laura, as she replaces the untameable Sir Percival Glyde (who attempted to disrupt Laura-Marian intimacy) with an approved Walter (who promotes Laura-Marian intimacy). In a society which would no longer permit Laura and Marian to live in their isolated abode of mutual attachment untainted by male interference, they choose the most viable option of Walter to enable their togetherness. As Beth Leonardo Silva argues: "The bond between siblings is not an incestuous relationship that becomes domesticated, but a model for a revised marital contract grounded in partnership" between all three of them (section 3, para 4).

## **Conclusion**

Collins's novel does not straightforwardly subscribe to either reading of its alleged progressive radicalism or conservative conventionalism. Instead, appropriating the structural requirement of a sensation novel to harbour a mystery or a secret beneath seemingly normative surfaces, Collins disguises his subversive elements under stereotypical characterisation. The proper feminine exteriors of Laura and Madame Fosco carry with them the threats of incapability or disaster which makes the novel's final acceptance of them doubtful. On the other hand, Mrs Catherick, the transgressive feminine, is the bold and brave woman who successfully fights against society's unjust prejudices and the class tyranny of Sir Percival. Finally, the novel does not fall into the clichéd trap of creating a dichotomy between the "pure" and the "degraded" woman: Anne and Marian both pose as possible doubles for the idealised Laura, however, the text does

not villainize them, instead, presents one as sharing common victimhood with the heroine and other as a hero to her. Collins's act of subversion is not opposed to the text's sensational quality; the text employs sensation to safely (escaping social censure) represent its subversive inclinations.

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