Victorian Reality Refracted: Wilkie Collins's Sensation Fiction

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and Literature and German Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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September 2021

Abstract

Wilkie Collins was a master of the sensation fiction genre. He wrote multiple bestselling novels and further defined and expanded the genre. He is most famous for his rich multiple character narrations, overly detailed descriptions and genius plots, with complicated conflicts and emotional denouements. Collins had a very successful career as a writer of sensation novels and plays for the theater. He was an actor himself and his love for the theatre brought him closer to his long term friend and mentor Charles Dickens. Collins was influenced by numerous aspects of his life and he drew his inspiration for his novels from those sources. Collins is famous for bringing out the most sensational from everyday life. He had a tendency to voice the socially disadvantaged groups in his novels and shine a light on inaccurate Victorian norms. His gender views also stand out, as he advocated emancipated and transgressive female and effeminate male characters throughout his novels. He masterfully uses different narrative techniques and enticing plots to craft his ingenious design. The thesis aims to tackle these aspects in connection to his personal life and analyze the following novels: *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862) and *The Moonstone* (1868). Collins successfully managed to merge genres of detective novels, mysteries and melodrama. His work received numerous positive critical reviews from other writers. His work is just one of the reasons why sensation fiction still remains a popular genre. His most famous novel *The Moonstone* (1868) is one of the first detective novels and it greatly influenced detective fiction.

Key words: Wilkie Collins, sensation fiction, gender roles, disabilities, *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone*, *No Name*, narration, character typology, effeminate males, emancipated women

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Introduction

"*Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait.*"

(Wilkie Collins as quoted in Nadel 1983: 62)

The forementioned quote is probably one of Collins's most famous quotes. It summarizes his attitude towards his oeuvre and the genre of sensation fiction, which he helped expand. Collins was a master of sensation fiction and wrote dozens of bestselling novels. He is an important literary figure of the Victorian period. Through some of his characters and plots, Collins managed to comment of the social norms of that period, while also challenging them. This notion leaves him as one of the most influential writers of his time with his literary legacy still popular as ever.

This thesis will delve into Wilkie Collins's most famous novels *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862) and *The Moonstone* (1868), with a more detailed look at the narrative techniques, plots, Victorian social norms, gender views, socially disadvantaged groups and Collins's private life and affairs which influenced his novels.

The thesis is firstly going to explore Collins's professional and private affairs, which were partly influenced by his friend and mentor Charles Dickens. Collins's work will be discussed in comparison with the mainstream Victorian fiction, as his work received a large amount of criticism. Collins's view of gender roles will be further discussed, because he commented on the disadvantaged female position in society through his novels. In addition to women, he commented and voiced a number of socially disadvantaged groups throughout his novels and highlighted them as actual human beings with feelings, rather than marginalized minor characters, which were often looked over. These are some of the recurring themes present throughout his oeuvre.

The thesis will then explore the generation of the sensation fiction genre and its derivatives in Collins's body of work through the following novels: *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868).

Wilkie Collins's was a master of the multi-perspective narration and his narrative techniques, as well as thick masterly plots with twist and turns, making the reader play the role of the detective. Collins always left his readers guessing about what will occur next and how the conflicts will be resolved. He managed to create a gripping storyline, while mixing different genres of mystery, detective fiction and melodrama.

Some of his most famous characters will be explored in the final chapter. Wilkie Collins's character typology has left a mark on literature and the significance of his characters cannot be denied. He portrays a number of characters, who would at that time be described as "different" or would be judged by the general public. Such characters include effeminate males. Finally, the thesis will attempt to explore the theme of Victorian masculinity, which has been challenged a number of times through his work; emancipated, transgressive women, as well as Victorian heroines.

1. Victorian fictional author and controversialist Wilkie Collins

Wilkie Collins was a master of thick plots and enticing mysteries that keep the readers on edge. He is most famous for his novels, which are part of the sensation fiction genre. His detective novels especially stand out among his body of work. His literary work has received positive criticism from a number of well-known writers such as T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, Julian Symons and Charles Dickens (Nadel 1983: 62). He was interested in a number of fields, such as the theatre, the law, and crime investigation, French cuisine, fine arts, traveling foreign countries, physical and mental health. Collins was trained to be a painter, like his god-father Sir David Wilkie, whom he was name after (Nadel 1983: 62). Later on he was called to the bar, but never actually practiced law (Nadel 1983: 65). Traces of his interests can be found in his novels, as they have influenced his work in some way. The various aspects of his life and his body of work will be discussed in the following chapters.

1.1. Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens

One of the most influential individuals in his life was his friend and mentor Charles Dickens. Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens were friends for a long period and their influences on each other can be observed in a number of their works. In the *Dictionary of literary biography* (1983), Ira B. Nadel presents their friendship. They're long-term friendship started with their mutual love for the theater. The duo even shared the stage together and frequently travelled together. In the fall of 1852, they toured and performed all over England with the cast of Bulwer-Lytton's successful comedy *Not So Bad As We Seem*, in which Collins portrayed the character of the valet. Even though Collins was twelve years younger than Dickens, they still managed to preserve a long friendship, which would benefit both writers (Nadel 1983: 63-65).

Dickens founded and was the editor of *Household Words* and soon after they met Collins started to write for the weekly magazine, which is just one of the ways in which Dickens influenced Collins's writing. His first short story published was *A Terribly Strange Bed* and would be the beginning of Collins's tendency to write about the spectacular aspects of the everyday life (Nadel 1983: 65). He would stick to this theme throughout his whole career. Dickens proved his loyalty to Collins by publishing almost all of his novels first in his journal: "In 1856 at the age of thirty-two, Collins was appointed as a regular writer for *Household Words* and, as a sign of his attachment to Dickens, had all but one of his novels of the sixties appear first in Dickens's new journal, *All the Year Round*" (Nadel 1983: 65).

Despite starting his career as writer, Collins still continued to act. He soon got to share the lead role with Dickens in *Shadowy Softhead, Friend and Double to Lord Wilmot*. In 1857, Dickens assisted Collins in writing their most famous play *The Frozen Deep* (Nadel 1983: 65). Throughout his career, Collins collaborated with Dickens a number of times.

Nadel (1983: 66) adds that Dickens asked Collins for help when trying to maintain readership of his periodical *All the Year Round*. At that time Collins was working on his successful novel *The Woman in White* and the whole novel would then be released in parts in Dickens's periodical starting from 1859 (Nadel 1983: 66-67). In the preface of his novel, Collins thanks the readers of his novel and describes Dickens's writing as "perfect", which only shows how highly Collins thought of Dickens as a writer:

> "In writing these prefatory lines, I cannot prevail on myself to pass over in silence the warm welcome which my story has met with, in its periodical form, among English and American readers. In the first place, that welcome has, I hope, justified me for having accepted the serious literary responsibility of appearing in the columns of *All the Year Round*, immediately after Mr Charles Dickens had occupied them with the most perfect work of constructive art that has ever proceeded from his pen" (Collins 1860: 3).

During their collaboration for *No Thoroughfare* in 1867, Collins and Dickens became closer than ever, but Dickens soon left for America, as Collins continued to work on his next novel, *The Moonstone* (Nadel 1983: 71). *The Moonstone* is still to this day considered as one

of the best English detective novels and even Dickens, inspired by Collins's novel, attempted to include some of Collins's techniques and elements for writing his final novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*: "Dickens seems to have been affected by the novel and its technique; he incorporated a diary, the use of opium, an oriental atmosphere, a satire of philanthropy, and the practice of ending chapters on a suspenseful note in his last unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*" (Nadel 1983: 72).

After Dickens's death in June 1870, Collins's was never again the same and he could not continue his success from 1860s. Nadel (1983: 74) summarizes, that their friendship was unmatched and that Dickens was not only his mentor, but also his supporter: "The Collins-Dickens association was a unique display of Victorian attachment between writers that created both a literary apprenticeship and a personal intimacy rarely matched in the period. Dickens clearly provided Collins with the encouragement, outlets, and support that sustained and advanced his writing" (Nadel 1983: 74).

Nadel (1983: 74) even mentions that Dickens's character Edwin Drood from his last novel was constructed after Collins himself and that Edwin's uncle John Jasper could be Dickens's representation of himself, having a similar relationship to Edwin as Dickens had to Collins.

It is undeniable that Collins managed to draw in readers with his recognizable style, which was the opposite of Dickens's style: "But Collins's good humor, skeptical attitude, quest for pleasure and occasional exposition of "a code of morals taken from modern French novels," to quote Dickens, provided an important antidote to Dickens's often unhappy and earnest personal style" (Nadel 1983: 74).

It can be summarized that both authors had a great impact on each other throughout their careers. Dickens was an irreplaceable figure in Collins's life, but even though Collins

was younger, his positive influence on Dickens should not be overlooked, as he provided Dickens with a different perspective when it came to writing.

1.2. Collins and the mainstream Victorian fiction

Edmund Yeats wrote in the *Train*, that Collins was fourth on the list of contemporary writers in 1857 after Dickens, Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë (Nadel 1983: 66). Yeats's positive critique marked Collins as a promising, young writer as his popularity started rising. The 29th of November 1859 is considered to be the exact date when Collins's popularity as a writer started, because the first part of *The Woman in White* was released (Nadel 1983: 66). Soon more praise from his contemporaries continued to prove his writing abilities and further helped his popularity: "The praise of Thackeray, Edward Fitzgerald, Charles Reade, Mrs. Oliphant, Gladstone, and Prince Albert, as well as Dickens, enhanced Collins's popularity and stature" (Nadel 1983: 69-70). Another proof of Collins's popularity was his income: "His estimated income of over £ 10,000 for 1862-1863 established a record for the highest yearly income of any writer of the nineteenth century, according to his most recent biographer" (Nadel 1983: 62). Collins's works have been translated into multiple languages and will continue to be recognized as one of the most important contributions to English literature and sensation fiction.

1.3. Collins's view of gender roles

As the 19th century was a period of change, women struggled to find their place. Janet Murray describes the change in the introduction of *Strong-minded Women & Other Lost Voice from Nineteenth-Century England*: "Womanhood was as a social entity was reinvented several

times in the course of the century, making it hard for individual women to place themselves, hard for them to understand what their role in society should be, hard for them to make clear the bases of their self-respect" (Murray 1982: 5).

Murray continues to explain how women were perceived similarly by other writers of the century. She adds that women would be categorized into three types: *the happy and fulfilled womanhood*, *the corrupted womanhood* and *the suffering womanhood* (Murray 1982: 6). Such images of women can be found in Collins's work as well, even though he was known for portraying characters of the second kind, such as Marian Halcombe, Magdalen Vanstone or Lydia Gwilt, who had either traits of the 'fallen' woman or the strong-minded feminist. Murray argues that these images described women who were not satisfied as they were seeking more than the social norms allowed: "Images like these expressed hostility toward women who were resisting the limits of their circumstances. They reinforced the belief that dissatisfied women were deviant and "unwomanly," that women who appeared to be seeking their own pleasure and happiness were behaving anti-socially" (Murray 1982: 6). Collins defies such imagery and norms and portrays his female characters as real people with emotions and more than just stereotypes of that period.

Collins manages to comment on the position of women during the Victorian period through a number of his female characters. One example is the character of Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. Marian expresses her opinion about the poor position of women and the way they are dependent of men and used by them in the following quote: "No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace – they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship – they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return?'" (Collins 1860: 170) Marian is displeased with the fast approaching date of Laura's wedding and expresses her

sadness and anger, because Laura and Marian cannot interfere as their uncle and Sir Percival have decided on the date. Collins expresses the female state of helplessness of that time multiple times in his novels, describing the clear position of women.

Beller (2007: 57) demonstrates another aspect of the female position by explaining Laura's mental state after she is rescued from the asylum by Marian and Walter Hartright. Both Marian and Walter noticed a significant difference in Laura. Besides her losing a certain amount of memories regarding the day of her kidnapping, Laura has evidently lost part of her identity. As Hartright describes her in the following quote, it took Laura a while to start healing and possibly regain her old self: "The worn and wasted look which had prematurely aged her face was fast leaving it, and the expression which had been the first of its charms in past days was the first of its beauties that now returned" (Collins 1860: 525).

Wilkie Collins portrays a number of different male and female protagonists in his novels. Some of his characters are crucial because they take on the role of the detective. His detectives are either private or professional detectives. Regardless, they can be differentiated through a number of other aspects, but their gender might be the biggest distinction. Beller argues that there is an evident distinction between male and female detectives: "Whereas male detectives strive to maintain the status quo of middle-class family life and the conservative gender roles it reinforces, the female detective tends to disturb tradition. Often, she is demanding change and insisting on her equal right to knowledge and participation" (Beller 2007: 54).

Collins uses the female detective to disrupt the social expectations of women of the period. Willis (1999) says, as quoted in Beller (2007: 55) that the female detective portrays two opposing sides, the detective who follows social norms and the woman who contradicts them: "The Victorian detective-heroine presents an anomaly: as a detective she works to uphold the existing social framework, but as an assertive woman she threatens it. Whether

amateur or professional, she steps out of the home to invade the strictly male domain of the law" (Beller 2007: 55). This can be observed in Marian Halcombe's behavior.

Marian conducts her own investigation in order to protect her half-sister Laura Fairlie. Marian even manages to successfully spy on Sir Percival and Count Fosco, but by doing so unfortunately falls ill and is unable to continue her investigation as she is bedridden for a longer period. Lucy Sussex (2003: 61) says, as quoted in Beller (2007: 56), that this type of unfortunate "fate" was not unusual for female detective of that period: "… early Victorian female detectives of the heroine ilk (whose sleuthing success is usually followed by physical or mental breakdowns, from which they emerge suitably chastised for their 'unwomanliness' and read to marry the hero)" (Beller 2007: 56).

Marian does not marry the hero, but is left in a weakened state and has to rely on the Count until she is better, which evidently leaves her sister Laura alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The Count and Sir Percival take this opportunity to go forward with their plan of separating the sisters. Beller (2007: 56-57) sees these types of incidents as a sign of the female weakness, which leads to a balancing of gender roles, but does not think that the female detective fails, but succeeds in protecting her heroic role: "By submitting to emotional collapse at this crucial moment, the female detective protects her "womanly" credentials, which thus allows her to retain the position of heroine" (Beller 2007: 57).

Gender played an important role in Collins's narrative. He explores the invisible borders of gender and gender roles, which were defined by society and tries to challenge them.

1.4. Voicing the socially disadvantaged groups

When it comes to the 19th century, a number of groups were socially disadvantaged. Collins assigns all kinds of roles in his novels to socially disadvantaged individuals. Some of the groups include women (of different classes), foreigners, servants, people with disabilities, mixed-race people, singles and even individuals who were labeled by society as "ugly".

The reader does not need to look far in Collins's novels when it comes to finding evidence for the disadvantaged position of women in the Victorian era. One example would be Count Fosco's remark in *The Woman in White*, about how a man should manage his wife:

> "Human ingenuity, my friend, has hitherto only discovered two ways in which a man can manage a woman. One way is to knock her down – a method largely adopted by the brutal lower orders of the people, but utterly abhorrent to the refined and educated classes above them. The other way (much longer, much more difficult, but, in the end, not less certain) is never to accept a provocation at a woman's hands. It holds with animals, it holds with children, and it holds with women, who are nothing but children grown up. Quiet resolution is the one quality the animals, the children, and the women all fail in. If they can once shake this superior quality in their master, they get the better of him" (Collins 1860: 300).

Another example of the marginalization of women can be found in *The Moonstone* and the character Rachel Verinder, whose behavior is described as hysterical. Knežević (1990: 11) assesses that one of the sexual prejudices from the novel is the position of women at that time, mostly because they were considered to have weak bodies and mind: "… the menstrual association evokes the familiar 19th- century prejudice that the woman is a creature absolutely determined by biology, a victim of her own cyclical temperament. In other words, an inferior creature with an unreliable physiology and mentality – often denominated as a hysteric" (Knežević 1990: 11). Murray (1982: 19) explains that during that period men and women belonged to two different worlds. The general opinion of that period was that women were expected to be domesticated angles, with an almost ghost-like presence, serving their husbands and families. Any kind of sign of independence was a sign of hysteria (Knežević 1990: 11).

Hysteria in connection to Rachel is mentioned multiple times throughout the novel, not only by male characters such as Gabriel Betteredge, the family's butler, and Franklin Blake, Rachel's cousin and love interest, but also by Miss Drusilla Clack, Rachel's niece: "We will not say that this was the language of remorse – we will say this was the language of hysterics" (Collins 1868: 253). Betteredge even explains that Rachel had only one defect: she was independent and had her own opinions, which was not usual for a lady of her age:

> "To put it seriously, my dear pretty Miss Rachel, possessing a host of graces and attractions, had one defect, which strict impartiality compels me to acknowledge. She was unlike most other girls of her age, in this — that she had ideas of her own, and was stiff-necked enough to set the fashions themselves at defiance, if the fashions didn't suit her views. In trifles, this independence of hers was all well enough; but in matters of importance, it carried her (as my lady thought, and as I thought) too far" (Collins 1868: 87).

Knežević sums up that the fascination with female hysteria served as a sort of sexual censorship and repression of desire, as well as being the popular attitude toward sexuality of the 19th century: "It could even be said that hysteria epitomizes this attitude perfectly, representing censorship not only of desire but also of the desire of an entire sex" (Knežević 1990: 13). It can be observed that Collins uses the hysteric state of some of his female characters as a way of bringing down the stereotype and voicing the general stance on gender as a construct (Knežević 1990: 14).

Another disadvantaged group during the 19th century is the foreigners. Although it can be argued how much or little they were disadvantaged in comparison to other groups, it is certain that they were too a degree marginalized. Some of the foreign characters form Collins's novels are Professor Pesca and Count Fosco from *The Woman in White*. Both men are Italian and escaped to Great Britain because of political reasons.

In the following quote Walter Hartright explains how the law would not have been of any help in their quest for justice, because of his social status, financial status and the circumstances in which Laura Fairlie, who lost her true identity and had to live in hiding as the escaped asylum patient Anne Catherick, and Marian Halcombe, her half-sister, have found

themselves in. Hartright also mentions that his friend Professor Pesca would not be of much help, since he was a foreigner:

> "It was strange to look back and to see, now, that the poverty which had denied us all hope of assistance, had been the indirect means of our success, by forcing me to act for myself. If we had been rich enough to find legal help, what would have been the result? The gain (on Mr. Kyrle's own showing) would have been more than doubtful; the loss – judging by the plain test of events as they had really happened – certain. The Law would never have obtained me my interview with Mrs. Catherick. The Law would never have made Pesca the means of forcing a confession from the Count" (Collins 1860: 585-586).

The character of Ezra Jennings from *The Moonstone* is a great example of marginalization of an individual, who was considered to be "different" for various reasons. Ezra is a highly intelligent doctor with a mixed-race background: **"**He had suffered as few men suffer; and there was the mixture of some foreign race in his English blood" (Collins 1868: 420). Betteredge describes him as ugly as his name: "As ugly a name as need be," Betteredge answered gruffly. "Ezra Jennings" (Collins 1868: 372). Ezra has a peculiar look to him. His looks go well with his identity, as his origin is ambiguous: "His gipsy complexion, his fleshless cheeks, his gaunt facial bones, his dreamy eyes, his extraordinary parti-coloured hair, the puzzling contradiction between his face and figure which made him look old and young both together — were all more or less calculated to produce an unfavourable impression of him on a stranger's mind" (Collins 1868: 417). Matar Al-Neyadi (2015: 186) explains that Betteredge's attitude towards Ezra is his deep-rooted stance that his Englishness makes him better than everyone else. His stance is therefore stereotyped and racist, since Ezra represents "otherness", which Betteredge so despises.

The subject of "disability" has always been a difficult subject, but still not to be disregarded or avoided, both in real life and in fiction. The Victorian era was viewed as a time of change, but still, people with disabilities were marginalized. Bhaumik summarizes that both male and female disabled characters in English novels would be portrayed in a certain way with negative associations: "… typically portrayed as innocent, somber and tragic. (…)

Physical impairment made both of them highly sensitive and in a way, frustrated" (Bhaumik 2016: 3).

Collins tried to challenge that stance through a number of his greatest novels by representing the impaired. Bhaumik (2016: 2) argues that one of the reasons for Collins to use disabilities in his novels was the fact that he himself had health-related problems: "During the 1850s, however, Collins's health began to deteriorate and in 1856 he had three periods of prolonged sickness that presaged the painful bouts of gout that were shortly and continuously to afflict him" (Nadel 1983: 65). Flint also explains that Collins's fascination with disabilities comes from his chronic eye gout: "His interest in obstacles to full physical functioning (…) may well stem in part from his own problems with eyesight – he complained of chronic 'eye gout', and consulted the ophthalmic surgeon George Critchett about this" (Flint 2006: 153). Flint continues by adding that Collins was mostly interested in individuals who also had problems with sensory organs like he did: "Collins is notably interested in those who suffer from problems with one of the major sensory organs – sight or hearing – and with the compensatory mechanisms which they develop as a result" (Flint 2006: 156).

Bhaumik (2016: 2) adds that another reason could be that he wanted to stick to the melodramatic tradition. According to Nadel (1983: 65), Collins was influenced by the works of Dumas and Soulie, while he was in Paris with Charles Dickens, which brought him to use aspects of melodrama in his works.

The Moonstone features two characters with physical disabilities: the housemaid Rosanna Spearman and Limping Lucy, Rosanna's devoted friend. Collins not only made disabled characters visible, but he also gave them the same emotions as his able-bodied characters. This can be observed through the comparison of Rachel Verinder and Rosanna Spearman.

Rosanna Spearman is a housemaid with a deformed shoulder, who is also described as ugly by the butler Gabriel Betteredge: “There was certainly no beauty about her to make the others envious; she was the plainest woman in the house, with the additional misfortune of having one shoulder bigger than the other” (Collins 1868: 54-55). She is not only disabled and would occasionally have “fainting fits”, but also a servant and a woman, which places her in a socially disadvantaged position. Collins gives Rosanna in the novel what Rachel wants most: sexual freedom. Rosanna gains this advantage when she admits to putting on Franklin Blake’s stained nightshirt. She did so, because she was in love with him. Beller compares the reasons why Rosanna and Rachel keep their secrets and indicates that while Rachel kept her secret because of an inner conflict, Rosanna kept her secret because of her desire and in order to protect Blake: “Rosanna Spearman’s silence is similarly individualistic, motivated as it is by a self-interested desire, not only to protect the man she misguidedly loves but also to gain power over him” (Beller 2007: 52).

Rosanna’s character not only fought the repression of female sexuality, she was the vehicle through which Collins broke the Victorian representation of the lower-class woman and her repressed sexuality. As Knežević explains it, Collins could not have chosen a better way of representing the disabled lower-class female servant, than by making her an actual human being, capable of emotions and a need for desire and love: “… the novel does not make her sexual awareness an element of upholding the prevalent ideologies and practices, but rather makes her desire become a vehicle of transgressive criticism” (Knežević 1990: 15). Flint (2006: 154) also observes that Collins wanted to address the similarities of the able-bodied and the disabled, rather than avoiding the topic. In doing so, he manages to criticize the discriminatory Victorian stance about disabilities.

Collins further portrays two types of disabilities in *The Woman in White*: the self-proclaimed invalid Frederick Fairlie and the mentally unstable Anne Catherick. Frederick

Fairlie is Laura Fairlie's highly sensitive uncle, who never leaves his room let alone Limmeridge house: "My uncle, Mr. Fairlie, never joins us at any of our meals: he is an invalid, and keeps bachelor state in his own apartments" (Collins 1860: 34-35). He is afraid of falling ill. There is no physical proof that he is in any way disabled and no one knows what is wrong with him, but he proclaims himself to be very weak and sensitive as Marian Halcombe explains: "… and Mr. Fairlie is too great an invalid to be a companion for anybody. I don't know what is the matter with him, and the doctors don't know what is the matter with him, and he doesn't know himself what is the matter with him. We all say it's on the nerves, and we none of us know what we mean when we say it" (Collins 1860: 36). So sensitive that even the loud sound of shoes can upset him, but this can also be attributed to his personality.

Similar to Frederick Fairlie is another character from Collins's novels: Noel Vanstone from *No Name*. Noel is Magdalen's cousin and husband. He is physically weak and sensitive. Bhaumik (2016: 5) explains that he is lazy, as he looks at everything with half-closed eyes and depends on everyone else.

It can be summarized that these two characters are the only exception among the physically disabled characters, because they are not marginalized by the society as the others are. They isolate themselves from society willingly due to their false disabilities and sensitive nature. Their upper-class positions and gender are also one of the reasons they are not fully subjected to social marginalization.

Mental disability can be observed in one character in *The Woman in White*. That is Anne Catherick, the actual woman in white, who escapes an asylum in the beginning of the novel and who is of great importance for the narrative. It can be discussed whether or not she was actually in such a mental state or simply had an unlucky fate and was caught up in the unfavorable circumstances of her mother's bargain. Bhaumik (2016: 5) states that insanity was a major issue in the Victorian era and that it was the consequence of the following

reasons: unfortunate biological inheritance, alcoholism, novel reading, excessive abstinence and sexual desire. Anne Catherick had no one to blame for the imprisonment than Sir Percival, who was convinced that Anne was aware of his secret: his parents' marriage was illegitimate and he tried to forge the proof of their nuptials. The discovery of his crime would ultimately strip him of his status and bring him imprisonment or worse. So Anne was not truly insane, but was just forced to live in the asylum. Upon their first encounter in the novel, Walter Hartright cannot assess whether the woman he just helped could have been insane or not, but he certainly questions if his actions were right, as helping an insane patient could have been dangerous and possibly illegal:

> "But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had, I can honestly declare, never occurred to me, in connection with her. I had seen nothing, in her language or her actions, to justify it at the time; and, even with the new light thrown on her by the words which the stranger had addressed to the policeman, I could see nothing to justify it now. What had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man's duty, mercifully to control?" (Collins 1860: 31)

His thoughts reflects the stance the Victorian society had about insane people and that they should be kept away from others as they posed a threat to society (Bhaumik 2016: 5). Bhaumik further observes how Anne's identity was created by Sir Percival and Count Fosco. Sexual hierarchy plays a role in their manipulation as well. It was so easy for them as two men to manipulate and use to their advantage two innocent women, Laura and Anne, and strip them of their identities: "Count Fosco and Sir Percival have primarily constructed Anne's identity as an 'insane' woman, which they later impose on Laura, robbing Laura off her former social and financial identity. It also shows how the change of situation and experience turns a respectable upperclass lady into a 'mad' marginalised woman" (Bhaumik 2016: 7). Their successful actions are proof of the social disadvantage the "insane" as well as women had. The Count and Sir Percival were successful in their plan, but only until Marian Halcombe manages to interfere with the help of Walter Hartright. By using Marian, the

novel's heroine, Collins is successful in opposing the unjust Victorian treatment and exploitation of the mentally disabled individuals and women in general as well.

Matilda Wragge from *No Name* could be an example of mental disability or learning disability. She is the wife of Captain Wragge. Matilda is described by Magdalen as a gentle giant: "The lady of the faded blue eyes slowly rose to an apparently interminable height. When she had at last attained an upright position, she towered to a stature of two or three inches over six feet. Giants of both sexes are, by a wise dispensation of Providence, created, for the most part, gentle" (Collins 1862: 193). She often has a "buzzing" in her head since she was a waitress and could not remember all of the orders: "As sure as ever I sit down to this book the Buzzing in my head begins again. Who's to make it out? Sometimes I think I've got it, and it all goes away from me. Sometimes I think I haven't got it, and it all comes back in a heap" (Collins 1862: 197).

Matilda is treated as an idiot throughout the novel. Even her own husband calls her "slow" and "torpid" and treats her poorly as he shouts at her: ""Mrs. Wragge is not deaf," explained the captain. "She's only a little slow. Constitutionally torpid--if I may use the expression. I am merely loud with her (and I beg you will honor me by being loud, too) as a necessary stimulant to her ideas. Shout at her--and her mind comes up to time. Speak to her--and she drifts miles away from you directly. Mrs. Wragge!"" (Collins 1862: 193) Matilda is the perfect example of a dutiful wife. She fulfills every wish the Captain has, like when he orders an omelette for breakfast. Matilda struggles to understand what a thumb-size amount of butter is as her thumbs are naturally larger: "'Put a piece of butter the size of your thumb into the frying-pan.'--Look at my thumb, and look at yours! whose size does she mean?" (Collins 1862: 198) Bhaumik (2016: 7) believes that through Matilda's and Captain's physical misbalance, Collins tried to challenge the traditional male-female dynamics. Yet, regardless of

Matilda's proportions, she is still under the Captain's control because of her mental state, which he exploits.

Unmarried people were also marginalized to a certain degree during the 19th Century. Frederick Fairlie describes the judgement single people would receive from married people. This also reflects the stance of the Victorian society about the unmarried:

> "Nothing, in my opinion, sets the odious selfishness of mankind in such a repulsively vivid light as the treatment, in all classes of society, which the Single people receive at the hands of the Married people. When you have once shown yourself too considerate and self-denying to add a family of your own to an already overcrowded population, you are vindictively marked out by your married friends, who have no similar consideration and no similar self-denial, as the recipient of half their conjugal troubles, and the born friend of all their children." (Collins 1860: 320)

There was certainly a stigma around the unwedded, both men and women. Unmarried women were considered "unwomanly". The expression "domestic angel" best describes the expectation women faced during those times. Murray explains what was expected of the "domestic angel": "This "angel in the house," as she was popularly called, was expected to be safely sheltered in marriage, sexually passive, and dressed in confining, ornamental clothes" (Murray 1982: 19). Therefore, a single female character such as Marian Halcombe and many others, was considered not womanly enough, because she did not fulfill her socially expected role of the domestic angel.

It can be established that Collins wanted to highlight different kinds of characters in his novels. He wanted to shine a light on the socially disadvantaged individuals and take their feelings into consideration by giving the readers an insight into their inner workings and making their characters complex and real. Flint assesses that Collins wanted to make the readers consider their judgment about the socially disadvantaged groups: "What Collins ultimately conveys to his readers is the need to maintain a wary suspicion of the grounds on which assumptions concerning differences, in general, may be used to structure social thinking" (Flint 2006: 165-166).

To conclude, Collins himself made a comment on depicting his characters in a realistic manner in the *Preface to the Present Edition [1861]* of *The Woman in White*. He states that portraying his characters in such a manner is why his readers enjoy his novel, as they can relate to the characters: “The only sole condition which can hope to lay a strong hold on the attention of readers is a narrative which interests them about men and women – for the perfectly obvious reason that they are men and women themselves” (Collins 1860: 6).

2. Generation of the sensation fiction genre and its derivatives in Collins's body of work

Sensation fiction was the most popular genre during the 1860s. It was largely read by the working class and popularized by the works of Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon (Hughes 2002: 260). Edwards (1988: 703) also includes the works of Charles Reade, Edmund Yeats and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. The term sensation novel usually includes crime, mystery and horror novels of the 1860s and 1870s (Edwards 1988: 703). Hughes compares the genre to a traveling circus and describes it as: "… prodigious, exciting, and agreeably grotesque" (Hughes 1980: 5). Knight (2009: 325) adds that the boundaries of sensation fiction might not always be visible enough and suggests that Collins is the most famous sensation fiction writer.

Mansel (1863: 483) compares the sensation novel to spasmodic poems and argues that sensation novels satisfied the needs of the public, who enjoyed reading about sensational occurrences in everyday life, but he also mentions that there were three other causes which contributed to the distribution of the sensation novel: *periodicals*, *circulating libraries* and *railway bookstalls*. One of the main reasons why sensation fiction was so popular among the working class at that time was the easy access the public had through the means of the forementioned mediums. While periodicals were printed in regular intervals, the readers could take a temporary interest for the stories. Circulating libraries were the largest supplier of the at that time newest literature for the general public. Mansel argues that: "…the circulating library has been the chief hot-bed for forcing a crop of writers without talent and readers without discrimination" (Mansel 1863: 484). Winifred Hughes (1980: 9) also mentions *penny dreadfuls* as a source for popular fiction of the 19th century. The low cost of one penny and the enticing, scary stories featured in them, were just one of the reasons why the general public bought them.

Mansel further questions the quality of such literature and explains that the subscriber at such a library would decide on a book by only glancing at the book title. The railway stall, like the circulating libraries, provided the readers with cheaply printed books with an exciting or mysterious front cover picture, which would draw in the potential readers with a promise of entertaining content. Such covers were used, because travelers typically would not have enough time to examine a book before purchasing it: "… and keepers of bookstalls, as well as of refreshment-rooms, find and advantage in offering their customers something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dullness of a journey" (Mansel 1862: 485). It is important to notice that these types of articles were produced with the intention to draw the reader in and make them wait and come back for the continuation of the thrilling story, which according to Mansel (1863: 485) had an effect on the quality of the readings.

The demand for sensation novels only proves the popularity of such fiction at that time, but Mansel (1863: 486) questions the public's taste when it comes to liking such popular fiction. Knight (2009: 328) on the other hand, mentions Heather Worthington's study, which suggests that literature helped the middle classes understand the importance of the police force.

Most sensation fiction was based on real-life crime. Pykett (2003: 33) explains that newspapers in the late 1850s were packed with crimes, which posed as inspiration for sensation novelists. Authors would draw inspiration from current events and use these as a guideline for their next exciting story. By following what was going in the newspapers, not only did they get inspired, they would also at the same time have the public's approval for such stories, because newspaper readers would talk about the latest topics and spread the word about the most shocking crimes, making the stories more exciting and easier to write about for the authors. Such stories were to be called *Newspaper novels*: "Then, before the public

interest has had time to cool, let him serve up the exciting viands in a réchauffé with a proper amount of fictitious seasoning; and there emerges the criminal variety of the Newspaper Novel…" (Mansel 1863: 501)

It is important to mention that two horrific incidents inspired Wilkie Collins: *the Road murder* and *the Glasgow poisoning* (Mansel 1863: 501). The first served as inspiration for his most popular novel *The Moonstone*, while the latter inspired the novel *The Law and the Lady* (1875). Mansel (1863: 501) finds that "the mysterious or the horrible" attracted the public at that time and that writing about such crimes and using them for a novel should be done with the purpose to warn, rather than romanticize the actual crime in a different setting and with different characters, while creating a completely different story: "Crimes of this horrible individuality are the very last from which any one will draw a general moral: they are the crimes of their perpetrators, and of no one else. Even the plain lesson that might be drawn from the real dying speech and confession of the actual criminal is lost in this diluted mixture of fact and fiction" (Mansel 1863: 502).

Nadel (1983: 62) considers that Collins helped in making sensation fiction more attractive to the readers and left an impact on the reading public of that period. He further explains that Collins was responsible for the expansion of the tradition of the detective novel by creating two of the most famous detective novels, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

Collins believed that the most important part of a novel is to tell story, as he explains in the *Preface to the Present Edition [1861]* of *The Woman in White*: "I have always held the old-fashioned opinion that the primary object a work of fiction should be to tell a story, and I have never believed that the novelist who properly performed this first condition of his art was in danger, on that account, of neglecting the delineation of character…" (Collins 1860: 6) Collins manages to do so in novels, mostly because he persists in writing about the everyday

life. Collins does this in combination with crimes and crime detection, therefore deviating from his established course, so he could evoke the unexpected and thrilling out of the mundane.

Dickens perfectly summed up Collins's literary habit and choice of topics as "*wild yet domestic*" (as quoted in Nadel 1983: 62). Nadel confirms this statement by adding that in Collins's fictional realm crimes are just hidden away: "The ambiguity of a reality which is both factual and mysterious is the foundation of his fictional world where crime lies hidden beneath the surface of the everyday" (Nadel 1983: 62). Edwards (1988: 703) adds that it was the choice of topics that intrigued the public. He observes that these kinds of topics in combination with detailed descriptions, factual narration and usual social settings are what make them sensational (1988: 703). Collins also made a comment about his combination of the usual and the exciting and the reasoning for wielding both: "I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only" (Collins as quoted in Nadel 1983: 65). Conservative critics condemned Collins's choice of topics as it was "un-Christian" (Edwards 1988: 703). Edwards (1988: 703) adds that Collins's novels *No Name* and *Armadale* (1866), as well as works of other authors of the period, received the heaviest critiques. Nadel (1983: 74) therefore poses the question whether Collins should be considered "*a sensational writer or a social critic*".

As thrilling and sensational as these topics were back in the 19th century, in today's perspective they have lost its attractiveness among the modern reader. Hughes (1980: 189) and Knight (2009: 324) both agree that what was once scandalous in the Victorian period could nowadays rather be described as old-fashioned and even boring.

2.1. *The Woman in White* (1860)

Collins's popularity rose with the release of the novel *The Woman in White* (Nadel 1983: 66). It has been established that Collins used real life crimes from the newspapers and events that occurred in his own life as the inspiration for a number of his work. The character of Anne Catherick from the novel was actually based on a woman wearing a white dress, who Collins encountered while on a walk in 1859 (Nadel 1983: 66). This encounter became the opening scene of the novel: "There, in the middle of the broad, bright high road – there, as if had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave enquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her" (Collins 1860: 23-24).

The woman in white was called Caroline Graves and she was running from a man who imprisoned her. She would be used as the blueprint for the character Anne Catherick in the novel and both would share a similar story, because Anne would be involuntarily imprisoned in an asylum by Sir Percival Glyde. Anne's fate is rather tragic in the story. As for Caroline Graves, she would be Collins's mistress for a couple of years.

Another event left an impression on Collins and provided further inspiration for the novel. He read about the event in Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des Causes Célèbres*, which was a collection of famous verdicts. Nadel describes that in this incident a brother tried to disinherit his sister, locked her up in an asylum and declared her dead. She managed to escape the asylum while wearing a white dress, but did not manage regaining her identity (Nadel 1983: 68). The same fate occurs in *The Woman in White*, as Sir Percival imprisons his wife Laura Glyde and switches her with Anne Catherick, who unfortunately passes away in the process. Sir Percival inherits Laura's fortune and Laura is left unable to prove her real identity, as Anne and Laura share a striking resemblance.

Lyn Pykett (2003: 34) highlights one of the major elements of the sensation novel. Crimes would be committed in the comfort of the home and usually in an upper or middle-class setting. *The Woman in White* features those elements as well. Collins uses the familiarity of the home and combines it with a shocking crime involving reputable members of society, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. He further explores those themes in his following novel, as well as tackling new ones.

2.2. *No Name* (1862)

In his next novel, Collins's tackles a new topic: illegitimacy. The sisters Magdalen and Norah Vanstone are left without an inheritance after their parent's death. The reason is, their parents married after their birth and their father was not able to write up a new will before his death. Collins chose this topic on purpose, because in his private life he faced similar problems. Nadel summarizes that Collins never married, but had three illegitimate children with Martha Rudd, also known as Mrs. Dawson. Collins used his alias, *William Dawson*, in the registry of the children, even though he did recognize them in his will. Collins also adopted Caroline Graves's daughter Harriet, after Caroline's failed marriage and let Caroline move in with him and Martha (Nadel 1983: 70).

Other topics from the novel are also related to Collins's life, as Nadel explains in the following quote: "The story of Magdalen Vanstone's efforts to regain control of her father's fortune, now in the hands of her sickly cousin Noel Vanstone, involves problems of common-law marriage, the theatre, and family plotting, issues that clearly reflected the concerns of Collins's private life" (Nadel 1983: 70). Nadel (1983: 63) further adds, that chapters five and six of the novel are based on real-life events from Collins early life, while he was

participating in theatre productions with the painter E. M. Ward, whom he was also befriended with.

No Name was not as successful as Collins's previous novel. Nadel (1983: 70) explains that it was partly because the public did not react well to Collins critique of Victorian morality and that they did not favor the main character Magdalen. One popular topic of the sensation novels was the "forbidden female passion", which is exhibited through Magdalen as she tries to get revenge on the man who took her out of her inheritance. According to Edwards (1988: 704) this could be observed as "sexual rebellion" and "rejection of patriarchal rules".

The novel, like many other sensation novels, can be identified as part of the melodrama genre, because it features certain aspects of melodrama. Collins wrote the novel in scenes, as if it was meant for the theatre. Hughes makes a comparison between tragedies and melodramas, and concludes that *No Name* would belong to the latter, because it features, "*superficial personifications of Good and Evil*" (1980: 12). This conflict can be observed in the character of Magdalen Vanstone.

Mansel also describes this inner conflict and examines the difference between a real person and a fictitious character as a sinner and how both are viewed: "The real person is a human being, with human qualities, good or bad, to which the particular sin in question attaches itself as one feature out of many. The fictitious character is but the sin personified and made attractive as the source and substance of many virtues" (Mansel 1863: 494). Essentially, what should be kept in mind is that the reader should try to identify and understand the character and judge the sin and not the sinner as we are all only human with both flaws and strengths. Magdalen's flaws come out only after she is put in a disadvantageous position, making her fight for what should legally be hers by any means necessary. Therefore Magdalen should not be judged, but the law which discriminated illegitimate children.

Collins clearly voiced his opinion about such law through his novel. He was adamant about his stance on the matter and stated that the state is at fault:

> "I am far from defending the law of England, as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving their fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the names of morality and religion." (Collins as quoted in Mansel 1863: 495-496)

Collins yet again manages to use his work as a vehicle for rebelling against social norms and, in this case even the unfair state law. He follows the same direction in his next novel as well.

2.3. *The Moonstone* (1868)

Collins's most famous novel, *The Moonstone* was published in January 1868 in the Dickens's *All the Year Round*. The novel best fits the genre of the detective novel, with traces of mystery and supernatural elements, fitting for the genre of sensation fiction. The novel was a huge success and even critics loved it: "In the words of T. S. Eliot, *The Moonstone* is "the first, the longest, and the best of the modern English detective novels," an opinion echoed by Dorothy L. Sayers" (Nadel 1983: 72). As already mentioned before, the novel was inspired by a real-life incident that occurred in 1860 – *The Road Murder*. The teenager Constance Kent was accused of murdering her younger brother (Pykett 2003: 33).

Nadel (1983: 72) highlights that Collins uses themes, like the English imperialism and the unconscious state of mind, which were atypical for that period. Nadel (1983: 72) adds that Collins cleverly makes the hero the thief of the novel and places an emphasis on how the crime was committed. Pykett (2003: 34) further explains that this was due to the changes in policing and in the meaning of crime. Pykett (2003: 34-35) summarizes that this changed the world into a place where everyone could potentially by the criminal or the detective, and also

a place of surveillance, where ‘universal suspicion’ is applied. Collins contribution to literature has once more proven to be of great importance as his novels moved his readers to bring out their inner, curious detectives, observe everything and question everyone.

3. The Narrative Realm of Wilkie Collins

Collins was known for using multiple narrators throughout his plots, as well as detailed descriptions of surroundings and a liking for dramatic effects, which came from his interest for the theatre. Toward the end of his career he even dramatized his greatest works, which received great success (Nadel 1983: 76). Nadel (1983: 62) explains that a reason why Collins's work was so successful was the narrative technique that he employed. His ingenious design and narrative techniques will be further explored in this chapter.

3.1. Ingenious design

Sensation fiction features a mixture of different aspects from different literary genres. Hughes (1980: 16) identifies the narrative technique as part of melodrama, combined with parts of detective fiction, suspense and factual evidence, all presented to the readers through the everyday life. Hughes (1980: 19) adds that in sensation fiction both the content and the narrative technique are impressive.

Even though Collins received a welter of critiques in the final years of his career, his masterful writing and talent for combining facts with fiction is unique. Nadel believes that despite mixed reactions, Collins's talent is undeniable: "But he was always recognized as a master storyteller, ingenious creator of plots, and chief of the sensation school of novelists" (Nadel 1983: 76).

Nadel (1983: 69) argues that one of the reasons why Collins's novel *The Woman in White* gained so much popularity is the fact that the central theme of the novel is the identity swap. Alongside this exciting theme, Collins combined the right narrative style and plot to achieve such success. He adds, that another reason was also the fact that a number of mysteries continue to happen until the end: "And unlike his previous novels where the villain

was killed off (as in *Basil*) or revealed (as in *The Dead Secret*), too early, *The Woman in White* does not collapse at the end; instead, a constant succession of mysteries continues to unravel" (Nadel 1983: 69). Hughes (1980: 17) concludes that what made that sensation novel so interesting was the contrast between the mundane everyday life and the particular crime. The ordinary surroundings make the readers relate to the story, but the mystery behind the crime is what makes them continue reading.

3.2. Multi-perspective narratives and masterly plots

Collins was well-known for introducing the multi-perspective narration in his fiction. He uses his character's voices to tell their own stories and to add to the narrative from their own perspective as both the bystanders and the detectives. They fulfill the role of the detective unknowingly. According to Nadel (1983: 69), Collins's narrative style of multiple narrators, allowed the characters to share their own stories, which kept the readers interested in the story. The author removes himself/herself from the role of the narrator and leaves it to the characters and the readers. This way the narration and plot interlace.

In *The Moonstone*, the thief is revealed only after collaboration between the narrators. The actual detective, Sergeant Cuff, does not manage to discover the thief. The real investigation is done by all of the narrators, as well the readers. In *The Woman in White*, the biggest part of the narration is done by Walter Hartright, who plays a significant role in the novel as part of the detection process and apprehension of the criminals. *No Name* features a number of letters exchange between the characters.

Collins uses letters, diary entries and testimonies as narrative devices throughout his novels. These devices serve the purpose of proving different angles and perspective of events, as the characters get to share their thoughts and describe events in their own words. As Nadel

(1983: 65) explains that this narrative device is perhaps one of Collins's most brilliant innovations. Collins used this device in his novel *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852) and he continues to use it in his greatest novels. Nadel (9183: 66) further explains that a notable novel, which also featured this device, was in the short story *Anne Rodway* from *The Queen of Hearts*, which consists of diary entries of the main characters. Another story from the same collection of short stories, *The Bitter Bit* consists of letters exchanged between three policemen.

Nadel (1983: 69) adds that the multi-perspective narrative kept the secrets hidden from the readers as well. Secrets are of big importance for the sensation novel, because they add mystery to the plot. This way plot and narrative technique unite in creating a complex construct. According to Hughes (1980: 20-21) other themes, which add to the plot of the sensation novel, are usually mistaken or stolen identities, illegitimacy, impersonations, bigamy, return of the dead, accidents and murders. All of these themes Collins masterfully uses in his plots.

3.3. Fusion of genres

As mentioned in the beginning, Wilkie Collins was an admirer of the theatre. This also influenced his writing, as Collins liked to use melodramatic effects in his works. According to Nadel (1983: 65), he used certain techniques of the theatre and applied them to his fiction, which also helped him adapt his novels for the stage. In his novel *Basil: The Story of Modern Life*, he explains why the theatre is important for his work and how it is connected to his novels: "Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction: that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is drama acted: and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite

also" (Nadel 1983: 65). Gail Marshall also sees similarities between the theatre and sensation fiction: "The theatrical metaphor is used to great effect in Victorian novels, and nowhere more so than in the sensation novel, a sub-genre having much in common with the popular theatre" (Marshall 2002: 60).

As well as using dramatic techniques from the theatre, Collins was a master of mixing genres. As Nadel describes it, *The Woman in White* is a prime example of such mixture, which was another reason why the public reacted in such a positive matter when the first installment was released: "Applying a sensational melodrama to the background of middle-class Victorian life, first attempted in *Basil*, and then joining it to the mystery he proposed in *Hide and Seek* and the characterization and humor of *The Dead Secret*, Collins created a novel of startling impact and commercial success" (Nadel 1983: 66). Nadel further explains how Collins used melodramatic events, which helped the novel by adding more drama: "Collins furthermore establishes the convincing atmosphere necessary for the sensation novel, an atmosphere that makes the melodramatic incidents of plot appear inevitable. In this novel, scenic description and drama unite" (Nadel 1983: 69). Another example would be *The Queen of Hearts* (1859), which was his first murder mystery composed as a collection of short stories (Nadel 1983: 66).

Marshall (2002: 57) explores sensation fiction in connection with psychology, which increasingly got more popular during the 1860s, as there was a large interest about the state of unconsciousness and identities. Problems regarding inheritance, memory and identity were frequently explored in sensation fiction. Marshall proposes that these topics brought an element of suspense and mystery to the novels. The figure of the detective also plays an important part, as they deal with the minds of the suspects, which would then help create a mysterious narrative.

In Collins's case, such examples can be found in the novels *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*. All novels feature instances of stolen identity, retrieval of memory and the loss of inheritance. As Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* is placed in the asylum and her identity is taken away, she also suffers a memory loss, which makes proving her identity even harder. Both Magdalen Vanstone from *No Name* and Sir Percival Glyde from *The Woman in White* take risks and are willing to do anything in their power to regain their lost inheritance. In *The Moonstone* the detection process of retrieving the stolen diamond is executed by tackling the unconscious state of mind. In *Armadale* the topic of stolen identity is repeated throughout the novel, as readers encounter multiple characters with the same name. Collins uses these intriguing topics to create a genre of his own. Mark Knight (2009: 323) indicates that Collins, alongside *Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, was known for combining sensation fiction with other genres, such as crime fiction and the gothic.

4. Wilkie Collins's character typology

Collins is well known as the master of the multi-perspective plot and thrilling stories with shocking revelations, but his characters are what also makes the reader get drawn to the story. Collins himself acknowledges the importance of characters in the *Preface to the Present Edition 1861* of his novel *The Woman in White*: "It may be possible in novel-writing to present characters successfully without telling a story, but it is not possible to tell a story successfully without presenting characters: their existence, as recognizable realities, being the sole condition on which the story can be effectively told" (Collins 1861: 6).

Collins uses an array of different personalities with different backgrounds as the protagonists of his novels, but it is always the same kind of hero or heroine, who goes through a number of difficulties only for the reader to sympathize with the character. Mansel argues that Collins uses the same type of characters throughout his novels, differing only in the ploy:

> "The human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident. Allowing for the necessary division of all characters of a tale into male and female, old and young, virtuous and vicious, there is hardly anything said or done by any one specimen of a class which might not with equal fitness be said or done by any other specimen of the same class. Each game is played with the same pieces, differing only in the moves" (Mansel 1863: 486).

Nadel on the other hand, highlights that Collins brilliantly portrays his characters' peculiarities making them stand out to the readers: "Collins renders his characters vividly, stressing the quirks and eccentricities that make them memorable" (Nadel 1983: 69). These will be further described in the following chapters.

4.1. Male characters

Wilkie Collins uses a number of male characters to comment on the Victorian norms. He does so by voicing characters, which otherwise would not have the chance to be

represented. From male characters with traditional stances to individuals, who show clear signs of opposition to the Victorian norms; the differences of his male characters is what makes them stand out in a positive light.

4.1.1. Victorian masculinity disputed

Before discussing the topic of Victorian masculinity, it should be mentioned that part of Wilkie Collins's body of work played a notable role in the change of Victorian masculinity. Some of his novels include male characters that show narcissistic or melancholic traits of their personalities. Melancholia was generally viewed in Europe as a "female illness". It was also associated with female hysteria, whereas melancholic men were considered genius (Kucich 2006: 125-126). During the 1850s and 1860s a change occurred and male melancholia was seen negatively: "… male melancholia became associated with inaction, indecisiveness, inhibition and other forms of emotional debility traditionally reserved for depressed women" (Kucich 2006: 126). Kucich (2006: 127) lists the following reasons for this change: the growing social power of middle-class women and lower-class men, commodity culture and the effect of public school athleticism had on boys with displays of vulnerability being stigmatized.

Collins's first portrayal of an effeminate character was in his novel *Basil* (1852). Such characters continued to appear in his following novels and ultimately left a mark on stiff Victorian views regarding feminized male characters and male characters that openly showed their emotional side.

According to Kucich (2006: 128) Collins balanced in his novels characters on both ends of emotional stability, where some characters were described as melancholic, others would display grandiosity. Collins would also often place these types of opposing characters

closely within his stories, making their opposite personalities stand out even more so: “His novels pit cousin against cousin, brother against brother, and father against son in familial contests that suggest the intimate yet conflicted affinity of polarised melancholic and narcissistic types” (Kucich 2006: 128).

Collins further manages to portray some characters with both traits of melancholia and narcissism. Such is the character Walter Hartright from Collins’s novel *The Woman in White*. It is the circumstances that he finds himself in and has to live through which make him get in touch with both polarized sides of his character. It could also be argued that these circumstances force him to change his character. From being the drawing master appointed to teach at the Limmeridge house to helping an unknown mysterious woman in white in the middle of the night to joining an expedition to Central America and finally to devoting his life to apprehending the culprits responsible for Laura Fairlie’s identity theft. Every trouble he has to go through brings out his grandiose side, but he does it all for his beloved Laura and her half-sister Marian. Kucich (2006: 134) suggests that Hartright’s change in character corresponds to the changes and advancement in his profession:

> “Hartright’s synthesis of melancholia and grandiosity corresponds to the transformation in his social identity. As a drawing master, a gentleman dependant on the patronage of the wealthy, he begins the novel pursuing an archaic, marginally upper-class career model… (Then) he accepts the post of draftsman on the Central American expedition, then becomes an illustrator for cheap periodicals, and finally graduates to work for an illustrated magazine” (Kucich 2006: 134).

Collins’s character in *The Woman in White*, Count Fosco is probably one of the most brilliantly constructed villains in all of Collins’s novels. Count Fosco is the perfect example of Victorian grandiosity and genius intellect combined in one perfectly portrayed black hat. He is the villain, but Collins made him very charming and likeable throughout the novel, making the reader question his character. Before being an evil mastermind, he is a gentleman with a talent for verbally expressing himself. According to Nadel (1983: 66), Count Fosco was

inspired by one of Collins's characters, Dr. Dulcifer from his five-part novel *A Rouge's Life* published in 1856 in Dickens's magazine *Household Words*.

The Count represents the exact opposite of Walter Hartright and therefore is his rival in the book. Fosco is the mastermind behind Sir Percival's plan to involuntarily place his wife Laura in an asylum and replace her with Anne Catherick, who unfortunately passes away. "Her death" leaves Sir Percival and Count Fosco a decent inheritance. If it were not for Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe, the culprits would have almost gotten away with the crime. Even though Count Fosco represents the genius evil mastermind in the story, Collins did give him certain signs of sensitivity, similar to those of Hartright. For example, he is very fond of his pets and treats them like and even calls them his children: "There are dogs about the house, and shall I leave my forlorn white children at the mercies of the dogs? Ah, never!" (Collins 1860: 213) Even Marian notices that the Count has polarized features and shows opposing characteristics. Her observations of his movements and behavior could also be Collins's foreshadowing that the Count was actually a spy in hiding:

> "All the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them. Fat as he is and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women, and more than that, with all his look of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself. He winced and shuddered yesterday, when Sir Percival beat one of the spaniels, so that I felt ashamed of my own want of tenderness and sensibility by comparison with the Count" (Collins 1860: 204).

Fosco does not care what others think of his pets and the way he handles them. This could point to the fact that he truly is a sensitive man, who cares about innocent creatures: "He would blandly kiss his white mice and twitter to his canary birds amid an assembly of English foxhunters" (Collins 1860: 205). However, this sensibility and gentleman-like characteristics do not always apply to other characters from the novel, especially when there is money or inheritance in question. This can be observed when he accomplices Sir Percival in their evil plan to get rid of Laura Fairlie. Count Fosco will do anything for their plan to

succeed, because there is no other way out of his and Sir Percival's debt. Therefore, they are both willing to do the unthinkable in order to acquire Laura's fortune: "The bond of friendship which united Percival and myself was strengthened, on this occasion, by a touching similarity in the pecuniary position on his side and on mine. We both wanted money. Immense necessity! Universal want! Is there a civilised human being who does not feel for us? How insensible must that man be! Or how rich!" (Collins 1860: 56)

The Count is a complex individual, who uses everyone in his life in order to get to his goal. He used Sir Percival to get a part of Laura's fortune. He used his wife, the Countess, because he was a foreigner and would not be able to get part of the fortune without her. Finally, he used Anne Catherick for his masterplan. Therefore, he is the perfect example of male genius, with a sensitive side: "But Fosco represents precisely the archaic, genteel model of male genius that Collins sought to displace with humanistic professionalism" (Kucich 2006: 134-135). Nadel also acknowledges "the Count Fosco paradox": "His little pets perpetually crawl all over him (…) providing a complex figure of great appetites with a colossal paradox: a delicate sensibility and appreciation of animals combined with an evil and immoral mind" (Nadel 1983: 69). But Fosco has a weakness and it is Marian Halcombe, the strong and capable heroine of the novel:

> "We were received at the mansion by the magnificent creature who is inscribed on my heart as "Marian," who is known in the colder atmosphere of society as "Miss Halcombe." Just Heaven! with what inconceivable rapidity I learnt to adore that woman. At sixty, I worshipped 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" (Collins 1860: 565).

Fosco writes these words in his confession letter. His admiration for Marian proves again his opposing sides, as he is able to understand Marian's qualities and possibly see her as equally intelligent, even though she was a woman and the Count did express earlier in the novel his thoughts on women and how they should be managed, comparing them to inferior animals and children. Fosco never underestimated Marian. She would have long ago stopped

Fosco's and Sir Percival's evil plan if only she had not fallen ill and was unable to continue her private investigation.

The same polarized interaction can be observed in Collins's *The Moonstone*, between the characters Ezra Jennings and Franklin Blake. According to Kucich (2006: 136) Ezra and Franklin represent two completely different personality types. Ezra is the melancholic, misunderstood physician, while Franklin is the narcissistic, talented artist. Yet again Collins uses his character's professions as an extension of their personalities, but also places them closely together in the novel: "… the psychosocial power of humanistic professionalism is asserted through a collaboration between two men, bringing together Collins's characteristically opposed male personality types " (Kucich 2006: 136).

4.1.2. Effeminate males

The character of Ezra Jennings is undoubtedly an example of the effeminate male. Ezra Jennings says in the novel *The Moonstone* himself that he has both male and female characteristics: "An hysterical relief, Mr. Blake — nothing more! Physiology says, and says truly, that some men are born with female constitutions – and I am one of them!" (Collins 1868: 422) He is aware of his differences, which make him stand out and be judged by society. Even his first name, which is of Hebrew origin and means help (Knežević 1990: 17) or helper, is a unisex name. So his name not only indicates that he will be of great help for the story, but also that his identity is more complex than it seems. Collins greatly uses a number of contradictions for Ezra, as to purposely make him stand out with his "otherness" while also challenging the social norms: "Ezra is obviously the sum of the novel's metonymies: cultural otherness, womanhood, hysterics, the socially low and the unconscious" (Knežević 1990: 17).

Knežević (1990: 17) also argues that Ezra could be Collins's representation of himself in the novel, giving his life choices and similarities to Collins.

Similar to Ezra and as mentioned before, Frederick Fairlie is a peculiar character with a sensitive side. He is a self-proclaimed invalid, but does not display any physical disability. His sensitivity comes from his inner fear of getting sick. He is highly sensitive and irritable, so even the sound of loud walking could upset his mood for the day: "Creaking shoes invariably upset me for the day" (Collins 1860: 316) Everyone has to be careful around him and comply with his wishes. Even Count Fosco uses Mr. Fairlie's sensitivity to gain his sympathy and to break the news of Marian Halcombe's sickness to him lightly:

> "Light," he said, in that delightfully confidential tone which is so soothing to an invalid, "is the first essential. Light stimulates, nourishes, preserves. You can no more do without it, Mr. Fairlie, than if you were a flower. Observe. Here, where you sit, I close the shutters to compose you. There, where you do not sit, I draw up the blind and let in the invigorating sun. Admit the light into your room if you cannot bear it on yourself. Light, sir, is the grand decree of Providence. You accept Providence with your own restrictions. Accept light on the same terms" (Collins 1860: 324).

His sensitivity could also just be a disguise for laziness, just like the character of Noel Vanstone from *No Name*.

4.2. Female characters

Throughout his novels, Collins establishes a balance between male and female characters. For example in *The Woman in White*, Collins contrasts the characters of Count Fosco and Marian Halcombe. Nadel indicates these counterparts: "The evenly matched antagonists, Fosco and Marian, Sir Percival and Walter, also provide a balance of tension and action" (Nadel 1983: 69). The dynamics of these characters contribute to the reader's excitement, as there they are always waiting for the next step of each character, making the

plot more thrilling. By giving each of these characters a voice as the narrator, Collins further highlights their opposing traits, as well as bringing out some similarities.

Murray explains the difference between writers who were feminists and writers who stereotyped women as domestic angels: “Emancipationist or feminist writers, including some men, saw mercenaries and parasites where the conservative writers saw domestic angels. The ideal of womanliness for these feminists was similar to the Victorian ideal of masculine character: self-reliance, industry, forthrightness, and independence” (Murray 1982: 20). It is debatable whether Collins should be considered as a feminist writer or not, but he certainly does describe his female characters as strong, independent women, willing to control their own fate. Hughes (1980: 30) elaborates that Collins, alongside Reade, was one of the sensations novelists who managed to almost perfectly describe his female characters. They range from heroines to criminals, sometimes even existing within the same individual. His female characters will be discussed in the final chapters.

4.2.1. Emancipated and transgressive women

Women have been fighting for their freedom and rights for hundreds of years. Harriet Taylor Mill, in Murray’s anthology *Strong-minded women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England* compares the position of women and men and describes that the existence of women was reduced to serving the man:

> “When … we ask why the existence of one-half the species should be merely ancillary to that of the other - why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man, allowed to have no interests of her own that there may be nothing to compete in her mind with his interests and his pleasure; the only reason which can be given is, that men like it. It is agreeable to them that men should live for their own sake, women for the sake of men: and the qualities and conduct in subjects which are agreeable to rulers, they succeed for a long time in making the subjects themselves consider as their appropriate virtues…” (Murray 1982: 32)

The disadvantaged position of a woman from a higher class can be observed in the example of Laura Fairlie’s case in *The Woman in White*. With the marriage of Sir Percival

Glyde, he receives a certain amount of money every year and inherits Laura's fortune in case of her death. There was no power balance among women and men. It was always the men who were at an advantage. Taylor Mill explains that men did not approve of their wives having their own opinion as they should be submissive: "The meaning being merely, that power makes itself the centre of moral obligation, and that a man likes to have his own will, but does not like that his domestic companion should have a will different from his" (Murray 1982: 33).

Marian Halcombe, from *The Woman in White*, acknowledges her own disadvantaged position and lack of power as a woman, because she does not have the necessary rights to simply storm off whenever she wishes in order to meet her sister Laura as it is not usual for women, but is expected to act in a 'feminine' way:

> "If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun—a long, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman's ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the house-keeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way" (Collins 1860: 184).

Another example of women voicing their opinions and protesting the social norms of the period is from the same novel, when Laura and Marian protest their uncle's and Sir Percival's decision about Laura's wedding. From their decision it was evident that Sir Percival wanted the marriage ceremony to take place as fast as possible. Another example would be Laura opposing to sign the legal document Sir Percival tried to make her sign without even explaining what the document was about. When Marian agrees with Laura about the document, Sir Percival proclaims to be disrespected as Marian was only a guest in his house.

This scene also brings forward the importance of mutual support among women. Murray explains the importance of sisterhood and support: "Because of the precariousness of their economic situations and their segregation in the "woman's sphere," women necessarily relied upon one another for comfort and advice, pooling together their physical, financial, and

intellectual resources to make up for the difficulties of their position" (Murray 1982: 12). Kate Flint (2006: 159) argues that Collins sometimes used half-brothers and sisters as doubles in order to indicate their similarities and differences. This is true for the half-sisters Laura and Marian. They could not be more different in personalities and looks, but have an unbreakable bond and refuse to live without each other, even when Laura marries.

Another example of a transgressive Victorian woman is Magdalen Vanstone. Pykett argues that Collins challenged gender stereotypes with her character, as she shows both positive and negative traits, but her negative traits are "*associated with femininity*" (2006: 57). According to Pykett (2006: 59), Magdalen is the combination of Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe. Magdalen is more than capable of controlling her own destiny. She learns how to control her emotions and use her acting skills to her advantage. She balances the roles of the heroine and villainess as she pleases, which brought Collins a number of negative critiques. Magdalen faces the biggest change in the novel, when she is on the verge of committing suicide by poisoning, after she decides not to marry Noel Vanstone because of his fortune. A period of healing in her home follows, which is reminiscent of Laura's stay at the asylum. This leads to the change of Magdalen's character into a domesticated woman, living alongside her love interest, Captain Kirke, far from what her character used to. This change poses the question whether Collins chose this happy ending in order to appeal to the public or because it was the result of Magdalen's character development.

Marshall (2002: 61) explains that sensation fiction gave the readers a different insight into the lives of women, as they were not only domestic angels, but got to adventure outside of their four walls. This occurred at the same time as women from the real world started being allowed in to the world of higher education, medicine and politics. So it was only natural for the world of fiction to also include these positive changes.

4.2.2. Victorian women and Victorian heroines

One of Collins's most famous heroines is Marian Halcombe. Marian is the perfect example of the embodiment of intellect, emancipation and loyalty towards her sister Laura. Nadel comments that Marian is the perfect equal of Count Fosco: "His equal in the novel, Marian Halcombe, is similarly engaging through her assertiveness, intellect, and "blunt, matter-of-fact nature" which the count admires" (Nadel 1983: 69).

Magdalen Vanstone as the heroine from *No Name* is in some way similar to Marian. Magdalen struggles to regain her father's fortune and is driven to extreme measures. She disguises herself multiple times in order to regain it. Magdalen is caught between "Good and Evil" and therefor represents a nontraditional heroine, who was not favored by the readers of that period. Collins himself explains in the preface of the novel why he made Magdalen such a complex character:

> "Here is one more book that depicts the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have felt, which we have all known. It has been my aim to make the character of 'Magdalen,' which personifies this struggle, a pathetic character even in its perversity and its error; and I have tried hard to attain this result by the least obtrusive and the least artificial of all means – by a resolute adherence, throughout, to the truth as it is in Nature" (Collins 1862) .

Collins has tried to highlight both the positive and negative traits of his character. He acknowledges this in the preface of *No Name*: "Look where we may, the dark threads and the light cross each other perpetually in the texture of human life" (Collins 1862). By doing so he manages to bring the character closer to the readers, because they can relate to them. After all, Collins is known for portraying characters that were socially rejected, by making them as human as possible. Still, the readers found Magdalen's happy ending less than satisfactory, as she had a past full of lies and crimes (Nadel 1983: 70). Hughes adds that the readers particularly disliked her marriage: "Her own marriage - legal and socially advantageous – is worse than prostitution, a deliberate mockery of the domestic ideal" (Hughes 1980: 43). Even

with the slightest shift from the Victorian ideal, the heroine is no longer perceived as the perfect representation of the Victorian woman. Hughes (1980: 44) explains that the heroine then continues to stand as the example of "moral ambivalence".

Whether the main female protagonist is a heroine, a villainess or both, the woman is always centered in the plot of the sensation novel. According to Hughes (1980: 45), this is because it highlights the expected social ideal of the woman and contrasts the expectations of the plot itself.

Whoever the heroine is, the sensation novel never fails to provide her with a happy ending. Hughes (1980: 71) argues that the ending works as a sort of rebirth. In *The Woman in White*, Laura starts a family with Walter Hartright and Marian continues living along her side. In *No Name*, Magdalen and Captain Kirke profess each other their mutual love.

Conclusion

Collins's legacy left a great mark on English literature. His works are still being read and studied even today. His work helped popularize the genre of sensation fiction and make it to what it is today. His friendship with Charles Dickens left a great impression on his professional and private life. They both had a great influence on each other, which lead to a number of wonderful collaborations both in and outside of the theatre, as they shared a mutual love for the art of the theatre.

Collins always managed to find a place for disadvantaged groups in his novels. From foreigners and people with disabilities to unwedded individuals, he always portrayed them as relatable to the readers, because they too are just men and women.

Collins often drew inspiration from real-life incidents, using his personal problems as the blueprint for his character's struggles. He dedicated his life to writing and chose to follow his own path, despite the negative critiques of the conservative critics and general public. His sensation fiction always embraced a masterly plot, an interesting narrative technique and fusion of genres, as he combined certain aspects of mystery, crime, investigation and melodrama. Collins uses letters, diaries and testimonies as a narrative device, which provides both different perspectives of characters, as well as serves as factual evidence in the ongoing investigation. Collins's ingenious design drew his readers in as the mystery often stayed unresolved until the very end or more mysteries were discovered as the plot unfolded.

Collins often does not rely on the all-knowing narrator. He gives his characters the role of the narrator, allowing them to share their own experiences necessary for the storyline. His narrators work together with the reader in order to reveal the secrets or apprehend the criminals. Together they fulfill the role of the detective. All these elements combined, made his fiction so popular.

His most famous novels *The Woman in White*, *No Name* and *The Moonstone*, were highlighted in this thesis, because they pose as one of the most perfect examples of sensation fiction and an inexhaustible source of cautionary tales about human strengths and weaknesses. His novels dealt with the topics of identity theft, illegitimacy and crimes of all sorts, which typically occurred in higher classes. He was interested in tackling the mundane aspects of everyday life and made them into a spectacular event full of surprises and mysteries, which the working class enjoyed reading especially.

His characters are depicted as real people with real emotions, each one of the unique in their own way. Collins achieved his goal of using his characters as a vehicle for criticizing unfair Victorian ideals. Collins was passionate about the correction of social norms, which can be observed in a number of his novels. Collins highlighted aspects of the Victorian society, which were never spoken off. He never failed to challenge stereotypes in his work. He provided a stage and voice even to the most disadvantaged groups and allowed them to show emotions and play important parts of his plots. He fought gender stereotypes through his emancipated and transgressive heroines, as well as effeminate males.

Even though one of his characters, Magdalen Vanstone, received a large amount of negative criticism in that period, her character was ahead of her time, as she was challenged throughout the novel and managed to preserve and find her happy ending. Similarly to Magdalen, Marian Halcombe stands out as one of the most famous Victorian heroines. Her bravery and intelligence could serve as an inspiration for many women. Marian is the epitome of the wild and beautiful atypical Victorian woman, who did not let social norms define her.

Collins always made sure his heroes and heroines find a happy ending, which sends the message to the reader that good prevails, no matter how difficult the journey is. His fiction proves that human curiosity makes the best detective. No matter past or future, his novels will always bring out the inner detective in his readers.

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