The Marriage Plot in Wilkie Collinn's The Woman in White and James Wilson's The Dark Clue

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THE MARRIAGE PLOT IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE WOMAN IN WHITE* AND JAMES WILSON'S *THE DARK CLUE*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the use of the marriage plot in Victorian novels, more specifically in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), and its appropriation in James Wilson's neo-Victorian novel *The Dark Clue* (2001). By examining the marriage plot and its relationship to the changing notions of marriage in the Victorian period, the thesis offers a broad analysis of the gender dynamics in middle-class marriages as portrayed in these two novels. The analysis will be carried out through a close reading of both novels, followed by a contextualization that will explore the historical and literary trends they belong to. Special attention will be given to the analysis of the neo-Victorian re-imagining of Collins's characters in Wilson's novel.

KEY WORDS: marriage, marriage plot, *The Woman in White, The Dark Clue,* Wilkie Collins, James Wilson, Victorianism, Neo-Victorianism

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to offer an analysis of the marriage plot in the Victorian sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins and in its neo-Victorian adaptation, James Wilson's *The Dark Clue*, published in 2001. The Victorian era, which began in 1837 and ended with Queen Victoria's death in 1901, is a period characterized by many social changes, primarily associated with the Industrial revolution, urbanization, and most importantly, the rise of capitalism. Historians have argued whether capitalism had a positive or negative effect on the women's position in society and in marriage. Alice Clark (1919) argues that women who lived prior to the Victorian era engaged in many activities outside of home and were not reduced to the role of a mother and a wife. According to her, when capitalism became the prevalent economic system, "middle- and upper-class women were confined to an idle domestic existence, supervising servants, and lower-class women were forced to take poorly paid jobs" (p.40). However, Ivy Pinchbeck (1930) argues that "capitalism served as an important factor in the women's suffrage movement" (p.57).

This thesis begins with an overview of the changing notion of marriage in the 19th century, focusing on the Victorian period. It is very important to understand the societal context in which marriage existed in 19th century Britain in order to grasp the circumstances which inspired authors such as Collins to put into words what was happening in the world around him. Collins's work may be considered progressive, or even feminist, because of his portrayal of strong female characters such as Marian Halcombe, and this thesis aims to show the character of Marian as a progressive and liberated woman. Furthermore, the thesis explores how each romantic relationship in the novel *The Woman in White* fits within the novel's narrative.

The analysis of the depiction of Victorian marriage and romantic relationships in *The Woman in White* will be followed by a brief overview of Neo-Victorianism as a movement in literature and film in order to better understand the relationship between *The Woman in White* and *The Dark Clue*. Accordingly, after the overview, the thesis will explore Wilson's Neo-Victorian approach to the Victorian era in general and Collins's depiction of relationships and marriage. These include, but are not limited to, the inclusion of some contemporary literary conventions in the portrayal of marriage, such as graphic scenes of domestic violence and rape. Finally, the thesis concludes by offering some insights on contemporary depictions of the Victorian society, marriage and women's position in the world around them.

2. MARRIAGE AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT

2.1. Marriage and the Victorians

As Appell points out, marriage was an important union which signified the fullfilment of societal expectations in the 19th century: "During the Victorian era, men and women searched for an ideal relationship based on the expectations of a demanding society" (Appell, 2001). Women and men were not equal, and what was expected from both genders differed depending on the person's social status and class. People of both genders who were born into lower social classes had to work equally as hard in order to provide food for their families. Even though working-class women were able to make money, they were often treated very poorly by their husbands, and domestic violence was often common in working-class neighborhoods. Many working-class women who were waitresses, factory workers, or maids, due to low wages, were often forced to become either full-time or part-time prostitutes, with every major town having red light districts where a man could pay for their services (Hughes, 2014). Many aspects of Victorian middle-class life, such as adultery, encounters with prostitutes and homosexuality, were carefully hidden from the public in order to avoid major scandals in their social circles.

In order to prepare for their role of "angel of the house", women who belonged to middle and upper-classes were required to complete various tasks, then known as "accomplishments" (Hughes, 2014). They were sent to strict all-female boarding schools in order to learn foreign languages (with the emphasis on French), sing, dance, draw and behave in a traditionally feminine manner. Education was important, but if a woman was "too educated" by Victorian standards, she was suspected to be mentally unstable and doomed to become unmarriageable. Many British universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, "served as a prime example of male

privilege" (Schwartz, 2011). Men had a lot more opportunities to pursue higher education, but the primary goal of their education was to prepare them for the role of a bread-winner and caretaker of the family (Hughes, 2014).

Gender stereotypes played a major role in a typical Victorian middle-class marriage. The primary purpose of a woman was to marry and bear children. Middle-class wives typically spent their time managing the servants and other dependants who cooked, cleaned, and took care of the children. Reading, writing poetry and contributing to conversations revolving around politics or economy was not encouraged because it was believed that too much intellectual activity would ruin their femininity and cause them to neglect their marital obligations. Men, on the other hand, were expected to provide for their families, participate in public events and conversations about politics and economy: "In both practice and prescription the male and female spheres became increasingly separated, and the roles of men and women became ever more frozen" (McDonnell, 2018).

As the 19th century was slowly coming to an end, women started a more organized approach to the improvement of their position in society, either through the suffrage movement or other means of social activism, and the narrative slowly started to shift. For example, the British feminist and socialist Annie Besant was a prominent figure in the Victorian times who publicly endorsed the use of birth control in 1877. She left her abusive husband in 1874 and devoted the next 15 years to fighting for reproductive rights and better living conditions for Victorian women. She and Charles Bradlaugh, a British secular activist, published a book titled *An Essay on the Population Question*, which was a republished version of Charles Knowton's *The Fruits of Philosophy.* They were arrested on April 7th, 1877 and charged with publishing obscene material (Sreenivas, 2015). Even though Besant's activism was important in the sense of

changing the way in which reproductive rights were perceived, “her birth control advocacy did not center on women’s personal or sexual rights” (Sreenivas, 2015). She was generally more concerned with overpopulation and poverty associated with having multiple children.

Another major topic related to marriage in Victorian England was divorce. Divorce was very expensive and hard to obtain. From 1857 onwards, men could obtain divorce from their wives more easily; they only had to prove that their spouse committed adultery, since adultery was the only acceptable reason for divorce (Victorian Era Divorces: Reason and Process, 2020)**.** For women, however, divorce was nearly impossible to obtain. A woman had to prove that “her husband committed adultery, engaged in bigamy, incest or bestiality and performed excessive cruelty on her” (Victorian Era Divorces: Reason and Process, 2020). It was extremely expensive and even degrading to divorce, because it meant the loss of property, money, and often also access to one’s children, making it shameful and humiliating for a woman to initiate the process.

2.2. Marriage in literature: the marriage plot

The marriage plot is not a Victorian invention. Many writers writing before the Victorian period, whose novels centred around romantic relationships, developed something that is called “a familiar suitor“ (Schaffer, 2016,p.61). The familiar suitor is a person who is trustworthy, preferably rich and socially accepted. However, the familiar suitor often faced competition: a wild, thrilling seducer who did not comply with social norms. In many Victorian novels, the woman has to use reason to learn to prefer the familiar suitor to the thrilling seducer. By these times, marriage was consensual and people were expected to choose their own partners.

Consensual marriage meant that everyone had to display their best qualities for potential partners (money, good looks, personality, social status) (Schaffer, 2016). However, this shift from arranged to consensual marriage did not mean the start of a cultural revolution – "it did not eradicate social or familial pressures but altered the way in which such pressures were articulated and experienced" (Schaffer, 2016, p.70). People were still expected to fulfill the expectations set by society and their families by marrying someone influential, wealthy and respectable.

Many novels written just before the Victorian period focused on a woman's path to maturity which inevitably involved marriage, such as Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) , Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and so on. As Harrison (2014) points out, "the growth and maturation of a woman, each of these novels suggests, corresponds with her path toward marriage". It is important to mention that these novels were very popular amongst married middle or upper-class women who relived their youth through the story of the female character in a particular novel. The characters were always heterosexual and almost always wealthy, excluding the stories of people who did not fit into mainstream societal norms of Victorian England.

The idea of the marriage plot comes from the old Puritan ideology of a companionate marriage (Schaffer, 2016, p.75). Marriage represented the highest form of unity between two people who decided to share their faith for the rest of their lives. Many novels insisted on a happily-ever-after ending, with two lovers living together in harmony, without disagreements or fights. Marriage was presented as romanticized reality, and social or economic hardships often found in a regular marriage were rarely shown. The concept of marriage which was presented in most novels could not be further from reality, with women being treated as property with almost no rights or independence.

Victorian novels put a lot of importance on societal and family expectations of young men and women. As Nelson (2015) points out, “marriage was the career for which women trained and in which they spent their lives ’working‘in their separate but not equal private sphere”. Many women in Victorian novels, but also in real life, gave consent to their spouses because they simply did not have any other choice. Women could not propose to men and “they were taught to wait passively for proposals that might never come” (Nelson, 2015). Staying unmarried meant that the woman did not fulfill her duty and expectations set by her parents and people around her.

3. MARRIAGE PLOT IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

3.1. The plot of *The Woman in White*

Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White* was first published serially between 1859 and 1860. The novel follows Walter Hartright, a young artist who needs a stable job. One day, he encounters his friend, an Italian man named Pesca. Pesca informs him about a possible job opportunity in Limmeridge House, where he would teach art to Mr Fairlie's two daughters: Marian and her half-sister, Laura. He is hesitant at first, but eventually accepts the offer. On a night walk, a young woman dressed in white catches his attention. She seemed distressed and lost, so Walter agrees to accompany her to London. She asks him about powerful people in London and Walter is surprised that she used to know Mr. Fairlie's late wife and Marian's mother. After a while, they part ways. When the woman in white leaves, a policeman approaches Walter and asks him whether he had seen a woman dressed in white, since she has just ran away from a mental asylum. Walter is surprised to hear that because she seemed perfectly normal to him. The next day, Walter arrives at Limmeridge House. He encounters Mr. Fairlie and his two daughters, Marian and Laura. Laura immediately reminded him of the mysterious woman in white he encountered the other night. He mentions the resemblance to Marian and they both start investigating the woman's identity.

Laura and Walter slowly begin to fall in love. However, their relationship is not acceptable because Laura has already been promised to Sir Percival Glyde, an evil nobleman with a suspicious past. Laura therefore asks Walter to leave so as to not cause them pain. He reluctantly agrees and leaves Limmeridge House. After a few days, Laura receives a letter where someone warns her about Percival Glyde and his dangerous actions. She informs Marian about

the letter and how upset she is. Marian finds out that Walter has still not left the village and they both start investigating the letter. They ask the inhabitants and they inform them that a woman dressed in white has been seen near Mrs. Fairlie's grave. Walter immediately realizes that the woman is most likely Anne Catherick, whom he had encountered earlier. He finds her and speaks to her, but she gets very uncomfortable when he mentions Percival Glyde. Back at the Limmeridge House, Laura does not want to marry Sir Percival, but feels obliged to do so because she cannot break the promise she gave to her father before he passed away. They eventually get married and Mr. Gilmore, Laura's lawyer, establishes a document which says that if Laura dies without a son, Sir Percival will inherit her money and the whole Limmeridge estate. They later go to Italy for their honeymoon to meet Laura's aunt and her Italian husband Count Fosco. After their honeymoon, the couple return to Limmeridge House, together with Count Fosco and his wife. Marian instantly resents Count Fosco, she finds him scary and unlikeable. Meanwhile, Laura and Percival's marriage is not progressing well. Percival is becoming more and more unlikeable and irritable, forcing Laura to sign a document and getting furious when she refuses. His behavior worsens when he is informed that Anne Catherick is in town because she represents a threat to him. Marian is starting to get very suspicious of both Glyde and Fosco, especially after she overhears them talking about killing Laura in order to sell Limmeridge House. Count Fosco and Sir Percival go on a hunt for Anne Catherick, and trick Laura into believing that Marian is in Blackwater, sick. When she arrives, she realizes that she has been tricked, and seemingly dies from a heart attack.

After some time, Marian realizes that Anne Catherick has been put in an asylum once again. She decides to visit the asylum, and is shocked to find Laura who has been mistaken for Anne Catherick. She rescues her sister from the asylum and they return to Limmeridge House.

There, they find the tomb of Anne Catherick (who died from a heart attack) and reunite with Walter Hartright. Marian and Walter investigate Percival Glyde's past and they come to realize that he has forged his life story and that he is not of noble descent. Meanwhile, Sir Percival is in the church trying to destroy the evidence about his real past. He accidentally sets the church on fire and dies. Months later, Walter travels to Paris and sees Count Fosco's body lying on the ground, stabbed, most probably because he betrayed the mysterious political organization he had been associated with. After some time, Walter returns to Limmeridge House, marries Laura and they welcome a son who becomes the heir to Limmeridge House estate.

3.2. Relationships and Marriages in The Woman in White

3.2.1. LAURA FAIRLIE, SIR PERCIVAL GLYDE AND COUNT FOSCO

The relationship between Laura Fairlie (later Mrs Glyde) and her husband Sir Percival Glyde may be described as toxic and manipulative. Sir Percival's abusive and violent personality contributes to his inability to express any feelings he might actually have for Laura. He is a deeply troubled man who is contantly chasing more than he can have (hence the spurious title of the Baronet of Blackwater). However, his paranoid actions indicate the existence of a guilty conscience. Further examination of his actions reveals that he himself is actually quite vulnerable and easily manipulated. His friendship with Count Fosco exposes his weaker and more insecure side. Being the smarter one in the pair, Fosco is able to control Sir Percival's temper and provide a peculiar sense of stability into his tumultuous world:

> ‘My good Percival!’ remonstrated the Count. ‘What is your solid English sense thinking of? The water is too shallow to hide the body; and there is sand everywhere to print off the murderer’s footsteps. It is, upon the whole, the very worst place for a murder that I ever set my eyes on.’ (Collins, 1860, p. 70)

The aforementioned quote demonstrates Fosco’s intellectual dominance in the pair. His patronizing attitude (“My good Percival!”) presumably induces some anxiety within Sir Percival’s mind. He is impressed with Fosco’s intelligence and bold ideas to a degree, maybe even a bit enamored with him. Sometimes it appears that Sir Percival is paying more attention to Fosco than to his own wife. However, this relationship is quite one-sided. Fosco’s calculating and cold personality does not enable him to truly love anyone, even his supposed best friend Percival.

The marriage between Laura Fairlie and Sir Percival is the most destructive and harmful in the novel. The combination of Laura’s timid personality and Sir Percival’s manipulative behavior results in a relationship that resembles a nightmare. Their marriage is strictly for monetary gain and neither one of them enjoys it. Laura refers to the nature of their relationship when she tells her sister Marianne the following:

> “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 our 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, p. 100)

This quote is a rare example of Laura showing any opinion about the world she lives in. For the most part, she relies on her sister Marian to tell her what she is supposed to think or feel. Strict (particularly middle-class) gender roles in Victorian world did not allow either men or women to

express themselves the way they desired to. Laura's incarceration in the asylum and her ensuing state of near-imbecility takes the norm of the submissive Victorian wife to the extreme (Meadows, 2014). However, it cannot be excluded that Laura's lifestyle may be a personal decision or even a choice, because her sister Marian provides an example of a liberated woman who refuses to comply with the social norms. Laura does not recognize the power of choice, which is illustrated in her following statement: "I can never claim my release from my engagement…" (Collins, 1860, p.60)

Even though Laura is affluent and well-educated, she does not seem to understand that she does not have to obey everything that men demand of her. She is too afraid to divorce Sir Percival and pursue a relationship with Walter Hartright. She instead decides to stay with Sir Percival and not go through the shame of divorce. Laura's independent decision is an abdication of agency expressed through a declaration of illicit love (Meadows, 2014). Laura has little recollection of who she is, she relies on men and her sister to discover her true personality (Ablow, 2003).

Even though Laura's choice may be interpreted as completely free-willed, she did feel a strong obligation to her father. Her father was an old-fashioned, conservative man who thought that Laura should marry a wealthy and respectable man in order to live comfortably. Like many middle and upper-class women in the 19th century, Laura was trapped in a loveless marriage because of her duty to her parents, especially her father.

3.2.2. MARIAN HALCOMBE AND COUNT FOSCO

Count Fosco is arguably the most peculiar character in Collins's novel. A charismatic Italian man with a mysterious background, Fosco is an example of a typical Victorian villain. Victorian authors tended to portray foreigners as unattractive individuals with exotic backgrounds who cannot provide anything remotely positive to the plot (Tromp, Bachman and Kaufman, 2016, p. 75). For example, in Charles Dickens's short story *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners and Their Treasure in Women, Children, Silver, and Jewels* (1857), he portrays mixed-race characters, such as Christian King George, as "double- dyed traitors, and most infernal villains" (Dickens, 1857, p.30).

Fosco is portrayed as an obese eccentric with a strong personality. His bold appeal is particularly visible when Marian compares him to the French political leader Napoleon:

> "His features have Napoleon's magnificent regularity: his expression recalls the grandly calm, immovable power of the Great Soldier's face. This striking resemblance certainly impressed me, to begin with; but there is something in him besides the resemblance, which has impressed me more. I think the influence I am now trying to find is in his eyes. They are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw, and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel. Other parts of his face and head have their strange peculiarities. His complexion, for instance, has a singular sallow-fairness, so much at variance with the dark-brown colour of his hair, that I suspect the hair of being a wig, and his face, closely shaven all over, is smoother and freer from all marks and wrinkles than mine, though (according to Sir Percival's account of him) he is close on sixty years of age. But these are not the prominent personal characteristics which distinguish him, to my mind, from all the other men I have ever seen. The marked peculiarity

> which singles him out from the rank and file of humanity lies entirely, so far as I can tell at present, in the extraordinary expression and extraordinary power of his eyes." (Collins, 1860, p.60)

Even though Marian at first seems hesitant towards Fosco, a certain amount of admiration can be seen in some passages. To her, he is peculiar, unique and memorable. He is different than any other man she had encountered, an exotic foreigner with a strangely elegant presence. She compares his elegance and way of speaking to a woman's demeanor multiple times, such as here:

> "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."(Collins,1860, p.60).

Bearing in mind the aforementioned passage, what Marian is most fascinated with is that Fosco's personality and demeanor do not strictly comply with the binary view of gender. His presence is almost androgynous, with a wig, delicate skin and glittery eyes. He is soft-spoken and sensitive, and those personality traits were associated with Victorian middle and upper-class ladies. "Even though Marian does not explicitly identify the Count's androgyny as the reason for her discomfort with him, the novel's keen preoccupation with identifying unknown figures by their sex illuminates the anxiety underlying Marian's description of the Count." (Victorian Sexualities, 2015). Later in the novel, Marian says the following:

> "He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married *me*, I should have made his cigarettes, as his wife does—I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers. I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has

> forced me to like him. In two short days he has made his way straight into my favourable estimation, and how he has worked the miracle is more than I can tell." (Collins, 1860, p.61)

Judging from these entries in her diary, Marian is clearly uncomfortable with her attraction to Fosco. Their shared characteristics, such as their androgynous appearance, make them different from other characters since they both possess masculine and feminine traits that do not fit into traditional binary gender molds, and that experience is what attracts them to each other. She is trying to tell herself that she does not find him attractive by mocking his weight, but even then she finds positive qualities about him ("Before this time I have always especially disliked corpulent humanity"). She also speaks rather fondly about his intelligence and his ability to speak perfect English despite being a foreigner, as seen here:

> Here, too, his unusual command of the English language necessarily helps him. I had often heard of the extraordinary aptitude which many Italians show in mastering our strong, hard, Northern speech; but, until I saw Count Fosco, I had never supposed it possible that any foreigner could have spoken English as he speaks it. (Collins, 1860, p.60)

Because the Victorian society was so strict when it came to gender norms, stereotypes and the binary view of human nature, Marian is depicted as uncomfortable about being attracted to someone who displays qualities outside of the binary. This non-conformity can also be seen in the way Marian presents herself, that was not typical for Victorian upper-class women:

> "The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of

gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete." (Collins,1860, p. 10).

Femininity and masculinity were very rigidly defined in the Victorian era and people felt constant pressure to comply with those strict norms.

3.2.3. WALTER HARTRIGHT AND LAURA FAIRLIE

The relationship between Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie is central to the novel. It represents the idea of two lovers getting reunited after many difficulties and living happily ever after. Their relationship begins when Walter arrives at Limmeridge House to teach art. They immediately become fond of each other, but Laura is set to marry Sir Percival, the familiar suitor who brings financial stability and security. Walter and Laura's relationship serves as a challenge of Victorian social norms, since he does not belong to the same social class as Laura and actually is the one who climbs up the social ladder and becomes a member of the upper-class.

Referring back to Schaffer's (2016) notion about the thrilling seducer and familiar suitor, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Walter is the thrilling seducer in the novel, since he provides excitement and adventure, not stability. He is more or less unemployed, with an adventurous spirit (seen when he decides to investigate Anne Catherick and Sir Percival's past). He is kind, has many friends and his good nature is what initially attracts Laura. His gentle character can be seen when he decides to help Anne Catherick when someone else might not: "The natural impulse to assist her and to spare her got better of the judgment, the caution, the

worldly tact, which an older, wiser, and colder man might have summoned to help him in this strange emergency" (Collins, 1860, p.23)

Walter is the binary opposite of Sir Percival, whom Laura is obligated to marry. He is too emotional for Victorian standards and is often told his behavior is too effeminate, such as when Marian tells him not to "shrink under it like a woman, but to trample it under foot like a man" (Collins, 1860, p.40). Their relationship is put in danger when Sir Percival isolates Laura from her family and friends. Walter immigrates to Central America to forget about her, but returns when he hears that Glyde incarcerated Laura in a mental asylum in order to sell the estate and gain ownership over her money. In the end, they marry and Walter gains ownership of the estate. In that moment, gender roles reverse, because Laura, a woman, is the source of financial gain, not the man.

4. *THE DARK CLUE AS A* NEO-VICTORIAN ADAPTATION OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

4.1. Neo-Victorian adaptation

The term "neo – Victorian" is quite broad and its meaning has been debated extensively. Hadley (2010, p.5) defines neo-Victorian literature as "contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both." Ho (2012, p.2), on the other hand, defines neo-Victorianism it as "a deliberate misreading, reconstruction, or staged return of the nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media". "Neo-Victorianism" therefore refers to many aspects of media, such as literary adaptations, movies, TV shows and fashion choices. In recent years, many TV shows have been made using the Neo-Victorian principles, such as *Sherlock* (2010-2017), *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), or *Ripper Street* (2012-2013). The aforementioned shows share common traits, such as Victorian fashion, Victorian morality (sometimes showing the hypocrisy of it), and also, as Kohlke (2015, p.6) put it, "sexation" of Victorian characters, meaning that sexual scenes are not uncommon.

To be a Neo-Victorian adaptation, a text must be "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010, p.4). According to the aforementioned authors' book *Neo-Victorianism – The Victorians in The Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009,* "this kind of fiction often appears to be driven by a desire to illuminate and occasionally even 'correct' aspects of the Victorian age, or the Victorians' attitudes to the specifics of sex, gender, and erotic relationships." This notion can be seen in *The Dark Clue's* open descriptions of relationships and presenting people as sexual beings, which was not typical in Victorian novels. Often times a Neo-Victorian novel will shift from the present day to a certain year or decade in the Victorian era. This can be seen in the

beginning when Walter's letter to Laura is set sometime in the 1850's, making it seem like the plot is happening in the Victorian times. "It also allows the narrative to stray into the deeper and darker recesses of Victorian society" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2010, p.16). Romance novels written in the Victorian era did not, for the most part, openly showcase the darker imagery and the darker side of society, but Neo-Victorian adaptations explicitly show people as human beings, with flaws, desires and interests. However, in many Neo-Victorian adaptations women are not satisfied with relationships they have with their husbands, they are emotionally unfulfilled, such as Laura Hartright in *The Dark Clue,* with lack of communication being the main issue.

4.2. James Wilson's The Dark Clue

James Wilson's novel *The Dark Clue* was published in 2001. The novel takes some of the characters from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White,* and weaves a new story for them. More specifically, the novel follows the characters of Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe who, in this new adventure, are interested in the legacy of the painter J.M.W. Turner, a historical figure. The plot revolves around Marian and Walter's research into the work of the late painter, but also their personal relationships with each other.

As a Neo-Victorian adaptation, the writing style and topics reflect those of the 21th century. Marriage is presented as a more modern union, showing mostly negative and troublesome sides of human relationships. In the novel, Walter Hartright and Laura are married with children. Their marriage lacks communication and it is even psychologically abusive at times. Their relationship lacks respect and it seems that Walter is more interested in Marian than

in his own wife. The character of Laura is once again very submissive and lacks self-confidence and a sense of worth. Her lack of confidence can be seen in following quote:

> Do you know? I can think of nothing I have done, save to tell him that we miss him, and long for his return. That would never have made the old Walter angry. It would have brought him back to us. I know it would. (Wilson, 2001,p. 50)

The aforementioned quote is a fragment of one of the many letters Laura sends to her sister Marian throughout the novel (it is possible to argue that this novel is an epistolary novel to an extent).

Walter's egoism does not allow him to fully commit to his relationship with Laura. He is self-destructive and therefore Laura is never sure what his true intentions are. Much like in *The Woman in White*, the triangle between Laura, Walter and Marian acts as a psychological drama among the main characters. In his letters, Walter usually sounds like he loves Laura (he starts every letter by saying "My dearest love"). However, his actions do not match his sweet words. While working on the biography of J.M.W. Turner, he pursues a relationship with Laura's half-sister Marian. This is considerably different from their relationship in *The Woman in White*, where no infidelity takes place – merely a hally ending with Marian living with the now married couple.. Their secret relationship leads to disappointment, betrayal, resentment and bitterness. Laura is not suspicious at first, but later in the novel she does realize that Walter is not exactly faithful, as can be seen here: "I dreamed last night you met a clever woman, who talked to you of all the things I cannot, and took you from me. Dreams are often true, are they not? Laura "(Wilson, 2001, p. 120)

Once again, this quote can be compared to *The Woman in White,* where Marian plays the role of the clever woman with many interests unusual for the time, such as chess and hunting. Laura can feel that something is not right and that Walter is not the perfect man she believed him to be. Throughout the novel, Walter is dealing with a lot of internalized rage, which comes to light when he vilolently rapes Marian (p. 100-102). Sexual abuse and trauma are topics which have not been explicitly shown in original Victorian novels, but here they are decribed explicitly, with a lot of graphic details:

> Was not this the hellish parody of something that – despite myself – I had thought of? Had I not sometimes dreamed about it, even; and for a moment after I'd woken fancied I felt him beside me? […] [M]ixed with the horror and the pain – I cannot deny it – there was a throb of pleasure too. A mockery – an inversion, like a Black Mass – of the joy I had imagined. So it was not enough that Walter should betray me, his wife, his children, himself. I must betray them all, too"(Wilson, 2001, p. 100)

It can be seen in this quote that Marian is considering herself both the victim and the betrayer. She realizes that what Walter did is a crime, but she also feels guilty that she pursued a relationship with her sister's husband. There is also a hint at the possibility she even might think that she deserved what happened to her, since she betrayed Laura and her children. This feeling of guilt comes from trauma that Walter's behavior caused.

As a sequel to Collins's novel *The Woman in White*, Wilson's novel utilizes the marriage plot to develop a new storyline with identical central characters. The biggest difference between the two novels is Walter and Marian's relationship. In *The Woman in White*, their feelings are mostly kept private; they are not explicitly showing any sort of physical or emotional attraction. However, in *The Dark Clue*, their relationship is explicit and clearly showed.

The investigation into the life of J.M.W. Turner holds an important role in the novel's plot, most importantly for Walter Hartright's character development. As Marian and Walter progress more and more in their research on Turner's life, they unveil his dark side. This is depicted in the novel's title *The Dark Clue*: Turner's dark persona is the clue which triggers Walter's suppressed anger and violent temper. Walter's behavior starts to get worse – he neglects Laura more and more starts acting violently towards Marian. Wilson achieves this narrative by using the diary technique from *The Woman in White*, portraying the characters and their communication with each other.

5. CONCLUSION

Wilkie Collins' 1860 novel *The Woman in White* is an example of a sensation novel that contains elements of romance, mystery and detective fiction. The novel's plot greatly touches on the position of women in Victorian society and the concept of marriage. Victorian society, strictly divided by class and gender, imposed many rules people had to follow in order to be respected in society. By presenting strong or unconventional female characters like Marian Halcombe and Ann Catherick, Collins introduces a lesser known version of femininity in Victorian literature in a way that could be considered feminist, at least for the middle of the 19th century. Marian in particular offers an alternative to the conventional 'angel in the house' epitomized by Laura Fairlie. Collins's portrayal of Laura and her marriage to Sir Percival paints a rather critical picture of a typical upper middle-class woman of the Victorian-era, trapped in a loveless marriage because she needed to fulfill their parents' expectations and wishes.

The Dark Clue, a novel published in the 21st century, re-visits these same characters and imagines their lives some years after the end of *The Woman in White*, representing Laura and Walter's marriage in a more explicit way. It shows the dark reality many people are faced with, such as domestic violence, unfaithful spouses and lack of honest communication in a relationship. A juxtaposition of these two novels reveals various types of marriages and relationships, exposing the differences between the Victorian era and the 21st century particularly when it comes to the position of women. Both novels use the marriage plot to expose the potentially dark side of marriage; however, the contemporary sequel depicts these in a more explicit and disturbing way. One could conclude that such a re-writing of the Victorian classic points to how much has changed drastically through time, but that it also acknowledges that many problems still continue to exist.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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