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# Textual Possession: Manipulating Narratives in Wilkie Collins's Sensation Fiction

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**Textual Possession:**  
**Manipulating Narratives in Wilkie Collins's Sensation Fiction**

Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted by Kieran Ayton

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## Introduction

Wilkie Collins, a British author, published from the 1850's to the 1880's. He is most notably credited with creating the sensation genre with his novel The Woman in White (1860) and writing the first full-length detective story, The Moonstone (1868). Collins's writing style is characterized by an emphasis on creating a convincing atmosphere of suspense and intrigue. The Woman in White, arguably his most successful work, shows Collins at his peak in terms of plotting and characterization. In The Woman in White, Collins borrows key elements from the gothic tradition, updating and innovating an already hugely popular genre. He does this by changing the settings of his stories, moving them from foreign countries, such as France and Italy, to England. He also bombards the reader with documents, reflecting the age of information in which he lived. He takes a somewhat outdated writing style and contemporizes it to his time.

Collins contemporizes the gothic novel in two important ways. The first way is through transgressive gender characterizations. Collins is widely known for creating characters who do not fit into the specific molds of male and female. His female characters often show masculine resolution and courage in deciphering mysteries within a particular novel. His male characters frequently show a softer, more feminine side whereby they express their innermost emotions as well as exercising feminine intuition. One of the ways in which Collins illustrates his transgressive gender characterizations is through his use of documents within the text of the story itself to indicate one character's textual possession of another. For instance, two of the three

works by Collins I examine in this thesis feature first person narrators who control the information the reader receives about other characters in the stories. In The Woman in White, in particular, Collins incorporates multiple first person narrators in an effort to give the reader multiple viewpoints from which to understand the plot. In this case, however, a single character ultimately organizes the final narrative, the novel itself, and has the ability to edit the way in which information is presented, textually possessing the identities of the other characters. In The Woman in White, Collins's ability to organize a complex plot is at its strongest. In addition to The Woman in White, I will be discussing two of Collins's later works - The Law and the Lady and The Haunted Hotel. These two novels have been seldom written about. By comparing them to one of Collins's earlier works, I hope to shed more light on the complex issues this author raises. I also analyze Collins's eventual disintegration as a writer, as he returns to his gothic roots, discarding the sensation genre he helped to create. Collins's connection to the gothic genre is at the core of his writing.

The gothic novel flourished at the end of the eighteenth century. One of its greatest writers was Ann Radcliffe, whose book The Mysteries of Udolpho, Collins uses as a blueprint for his work The Woman in White. Radcliffe set her books in exotic and foreign locales, such as France and Italy. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, the plot revolves around a young heroine, Emily, who is trapped in a ruined castle and held prisoner by her evil guardian, Count Montoni. Radcliffe creates a surreal atmosphere, placing Emily predominantly alone, endlessly wandering the corridors of the Castle of Udolpho. Radcliffe incorporates supernatural elements into her story, such as

mysterious voices and veiled figures, but ultimately explains them all in realistic terms. Her works are enjoyable to read because they are so full of mystery.

One of Radcliffe's techniques of suspense is to isolate her heroine and emphasize her helplessness. Wilkie Collins uses this same idea in The Woman in White. In the middle of the novel, Collins's heroine, Laura, is isolated on the estate of her husband, Sir Percival, who is an abusive man plotting to steal Laura's inheritance. He tries to make her sign over her fortune to him in much the same way that Count Montoni, in The Mysteries of Udolpho, attempts to force Emily to sign over her fortune. In both instances, male figures who are supposed to be protecting females violate their roles by abusing their power. Collins and Radcliffe use female isolation as a means of creating sexual suspense. There is often a threat of rape or assault of the female characters, which emotionally involves the reader in their welfare.

Collins's The Woman in White also mirrors Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho in terms of structure. A close comparison of the two novels reveals some significant parallels. The first third of each novel involves the female heroine falling in love with a man who is not of the right social class or who is not wealthy enough to marry. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Emily falls in love with Valencourt, a young aristocrat who does not have much money. Unfortunately, the two are separated by Emily's aunt, who would like her young niece to marry someone wealthier. In The Woman in White, young Laura falls in love with her drawing master, Walter Hartright. Sadly, Laura is already engaged to a baronet, and cannot marry a middle-class artist. In both cases, a broken love affair is essential to the action that follows.

In the second third of each novel, the heroine is taken out of society and away from her suitor to be confined to an isolated dwelling. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Emily is taken away by her aunt to live in Udolpho with the aunt and her new husband, Count Montoni. When Emily's aunt suddenly dies, Emily is left powerless at the hands of a man who wants to possess the land she has inherited. In The Woman in White, once Laura is married, she goes to live at her husband's estate, Blackwater Park. Once Laura is under Sir Percival's power, he and his friend Count Fosco hatch an elaborate plan to rob Laura of her inheritance. Collins and Radcliffe create compelling stories through the injustices their heroines suffer.

The final portion of each novel follows the struggles the heroine experiences in order to regain her lost fortunes. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Emily escapes from Udolpho and takes refuge in France, where she grew up. At the end of the novel, she regains her lost fortune when Montoni dies. In The Woman in White, Laura escapes from the sanitarium her husband has wrongfully imprisoned her in and takes refuge with her half-sister Marian. Laura regains her fortunes when Sir Percival dies in a fire. The ends of the two novels find the heroines reunited with their true loves: Emily is reunited with Valencourt, and Laura marries Walter, the drawing master.

As this comparison demonstrates, Collins drew heavily on plot conventions which he must have read in The Mysteries of Udolpho and countless other novels. He then took these already existing conventions and made them his own. First he changed the settings of his novels, such as The Woman in White, from Italy to England. A good portion of The Woman in White is set in London, the center for middle-class

aspirations. Collins wrote specifically for the middle-class reader, who, by the mid-nineteenth century, was an important consumer. He also composes his novel entirely of documents, the individual narratives which Walter Hartright collects and presents to the reader.

In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Radcliffe incorporates documents into her story in a number of key places. In the beginning of the story, Emily finds her father sobbing over the letters of his sister. Later, when Emily is trapped in Udolpho, Montoni tricks her into signing documents which give him all of her property. At the end of the novel, Valencourt carves a love poem into the base of a stone statue, which Emily sees and recognizes as Valencourt's work. In all three cases, these documents and the information they contain help further the plot and serve as milestones in the novel. In The Woman in White, Collins uses documents, in this case the narratives each of his main characters writes, to tell his story. Unlike Radcliffe, who used a tightly controlled third-person omniscient narration, Collins incorporates multiple first-person narrators. These narrators are both male and female, giving Collins a freedom to manipulate and challenge traditional gender roles which would not be available with a single narrator. Documents become a way for individual characters, whether male or female, to gain textual power and control within the story.

In two of Collins's later works which I also critique, The Law and the Lady (1875), and The Haunted Hotel (1878), he emphasizes the importance of other types of documents, such as the transcript of a court case and a dramatic play, as a means to tell key elements of the stories. These three novels by Collins illustrate a storytelling

technique which is unique to him as a writer. They serve as much more than just plot devices. Collins's career as a writer can be traced through the complex ways in which he constructs these narratives and documents. His most complex and coherent work is The Woman in White, first published in the 1860's when Collins was at his literary peak. By the 1870's, however, his writing style becomes less complex, as seen in The Law and the Lady (1875). Ultimately it becomes somewhat incoherent, as will be seen in The Haunted Hotel (1878), a novella where Collins returns to the gothic genre from which his writing developed but is unable to fully resolve the plot devices he uses.

Collins's works often focus on gender and identity issues. I show through my analysis of three of Collins's works how this author uses and manipulates gender roles through the use of documents. Collins creates complex male and female characters who use written documents which they produce or amass to attain a level of power which they cannot otherwise achieve in the class-oriented, patriarchal society of mid-Victorian England. The written word often creates a sphere in which interactions can take place between males and females which cannot take place in the spoken word. There is a hidden level of meaning to Collins's works which is not discernable at a first glance. Perhaps Collins's greatest example of this phenomenon can be seen in the first novel of his which I look at, The Woman in White.



## **The Irrational Universe in The Woman in White**

In his article "Reading Detection in The Woman in White," Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. writes, "detective fiction vicariously solves life's mysteries by providing a perfect paradigm for imposing rational order on a irrational universe" (92). On the surface, Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White does just that. The novel centers on a diabolical crime, whereby one woman's identity is exchanged for another for monetary gain. The novel shows the trials and tribulations the protagonists go through to right this wrong. At the end, the guilty are killed and the innocent prevail. Superficially, at least, Hennelly's statement is proven. On a deeper level, however, Collins does more than create a simple mystery. He raises questions about gender, identity, and the possession and control of others through his use of texts. These issues cannot be understood easily, and ultimately Collins disproves Hennelly's theory by leaving the reader with ideological problems that are raised but never solved.

The story opens when Walter Hartright, a young drawing master, leaves his home in London and travels to an isolated country estate, Limmeridge House, in order to instruct two young ladies, Laura and Marian, in the art of drawing. Along the way, he meets a mysterious woman dressed in white who entreats his assistance. Walter complies and later finds out that her name is Anne Catherick and that she has escaped from an asylum. Upon arriving at Limmeridge House, Walter meets Laura and her half-sister Marian. Walter immediately notices a strong resemblance between Laura and the strange woman in white he met on his journey. During his stay at Limmeridge House, Walter falls in love with Laura, who he learns is wealthy from her father's side

and engaged to be married to Sir Percival, a baronet. Marian, Laura's half-sister through their mother, has little money of her own and is a companion to Laura. Marian tells Walter his love for Laura can never be realized and that he must leave. Walter reluctantly complies and Laura and Sir Percival are married.

In The Woman in White, Collins uses a multiple narration technique, whereby Walter Hartright writes the main narratives which begin and end the novel, but enlists the help of other characters to describe events which happen when he is not present. Once Walter leaves Limmeridge House, Collins continues the narrative through Marian Halcombe, who keeps a journal of the events which ensue after Sir Percival and Laura return from their honeymoon. Marian goes on to live with them again as Laura's companion. While Laura is often described as being frail and dependent, Marian is characterized by her strength of will and strong intellect. Marian soon discovers that Sir Percival is planning to steal his wife's inheritance with the help of his friend, Count Fosco, who along with his wife Madame Fosco, Laura's aunt, have come to stay at Blackwater Park.

Sir Percival's friend Count Fosco is patient and personable, but underneath is very manipulative. He is full of contradictions. Fosco is a flamboyant Italian, who keeps pet mice and wears "magnificent waistcoats" made of "pale green silk, and delicately trimmed with fine silver braid" (291). He immediately feels a strong attraction toward Marian. While Marian is described early on in the story as possessing a "large, firm, masculine jaw" and "dark down on her upper lip [which] was almost a moustache," (32), the count is her exact opposite, flaunting his feminine tastes.

Marian and the count are equally fascinated by each other, causing Marian to record in her diary that “the man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him,” (219). According to U. C. Knoepfelmacher, in “The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and The Woman in White,” “Collins skillfully encourages the reader to regard this unconventional pair as the true protagonists of his novel, far more deserving of our sympathy and interest than Hartright and his insipid Laura” (65). Knoepfelmacher points out that both Marian and the count are outsiders and that Marian is only steps away from the count’s licentious counterworld of crime (63-65). What Knoepfelmacher does not discuss, but which I believe is a crucial component for understanding the count’s and Marian’s relationship, is that the two are also gender outsiders and are attracted to each other because they both transgress nineteenth-century normative boundaries of masculinity and femininity. The relationship between the two plays out in an unusual and fascinating way.

In The Woman in White, documents and the information they contain achieve importance of the first order. They serve as the primary method of narration. They also serve as a way for men to exert control over women. In The Woman in White, men repeatedly use documents as a means to possess the textual bodies of women. This possession occurs most noticeably when the count reads Marian’s private diary, which serves as the primary means of narration in the middle of the novel. He desires to find out her inner thoughts, especially about a personal interaction they shared one evening, a rare moment of unreserved conversation. Marian records this conversation in her diary, which serves as her personal text. According to her diary, as they stand, looking

at the setting sun, he says: "Observe, dear lady, what a light is dying on the trees! Does it penetrate your heart, as it penetrates mine?" (292). Marian then writes that "He paused - looked at me - and repeated the famous lines of Dante on the Evening time, with a melody and tenderness which added a charm of their own to the matchless beauty of the poetry itself" (292). Later she writes, "His eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of twilight. His voice trembled along every nerve in my body and turned me hot and cold alternately" (293). Pulling these lines out of the context of the story and isolating them show the relationship between Marian and the count to be an elaborate courtship. The count acts towards Marian as a potential suitor, quoting poetry he knows will affect her strongly. He uses words to penetrate her inmost recesses. This courtship is overshadowed by the fact that it can never come to fruition. The count is first a foreigner and secondly married to Laura's aunt. Thirdly, Marian is terrified of him because of the power he possesses to thrust himself into her inner world and affect her physically as well as emotionally. He makes her turn "hot and cold alternately" not because she is in love with him, but because he uses his voice and his words to cast a spell over her that makes Marian let down her boundaries.

Marian may not be in love with the count, but the count is certainly in love with her. He desires Marian because she is so different from the traditional feminine ideal. In many ways, the count is like a female trapped in a man's body. He enjoys feminine indulgences like sugar and cream and dresses in bright, showy colors. Marian, on the other hand, is like a man trapped in a woman's body. She possesses a resolution and

intelligence far beyond that usually credited to nineteenth-century women. Marian demonstrates her intelligence by scrupulously documenting the events that occur during her stay at Blackwater Park. Her diary is more than just a record of her private feelings. It serves as an important piece of evidence that helps to make up Walter Hartright's collection of narratives which he calls his "Court of Justice" (5).

Of all the narratives that make up The Woman in White, Marian's proves to be one of the most compelling. Her journal deconstructs the complex series of atrocities that involve Sir Percival's and Count Fosco's plot to usurp Laura's identity and gain her fortune. It shows the reader the steps the criminals take to gain their end and especially the power Count Fosco's magnetic personality exerts over educated and intelligent people like herself. Marian's intelligence and resolution to protect her half-sister, Laura, fascinate the count. He feels a strong attraction towards the woman he believes to be not his inferior, but his equal.

Fosco gains access to Marian's diary after she becomes sick with fever from staying out in the rain, eavesdropping on the count's conversation with Sir Percival. While Marian lies in bed, unconscious of what is happening around her, the count reads her entire journal, afterwards writing a "Postscript by a Sincere Friend" (343). According to Ann Gaylin in "The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in The Woman in White":

Fosco's unauthorized reading is a form of textual eavesdropping and becomes a satisfaction of narrative desire, for he possesses the textual body of the woman who so fascinates him. By presenting his inscription

in her diary without previously signaling to the reader that such transgressive narrative activity is occurring, Collins not only surprises the reader and heightens the suspense of his larger narrative. (319)

By reading and writing in Marian's personal document, the count textually rapes Marian as a substitute for physically possessing her. Because of Collins's mastery of storytelling, the reader tingles as he or she reads the "Postscript by a Sincere Friend." In an age where women were physical objects that were the possessions of men, Marian is the unobtainable ideal for the count. He writes in her diary: "Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe-how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME" (343). The count has read all of Marian's thoughts and feelings concerning him. He is inspired to write in the same text his own yearnings for her. An interaction takes place with the written word that cannot not take place in a verbal or physical form. The journal is a way for the count to possess Marian, as Ann Gaylin asserts, in a textual way because he cannot possess her physical body.

Collins does the exact opposite of what Mark M. Hennelly claims he does when he asserts that "detective fiction vicariously solves life's mysteries by providing a perfect paradigm for imposing rational order on an irrational universe" (92). Collins uses the detective fiction format to impose a type of irrational order on an irrational universe. He creates situations which defy expectation and gives them legitimacy by including them in a novel which is supposed to quell doubts about mistaken identity. In the beginning of his first narrative, Walter Hartright claims that he is compiling these narratives to right the crime that was committed against Laura. Yet the real author,

Collins, through the use of documents within documents, such as Marian's diary, allows an interaction to take place which could never occur in everyday society.

The theme of textual female possession occurs again in the character of Anne Catherick. This occurs when Walter uses the strange appearance and actions of Anne Catherick to heighten the interest of his own narrative. The novel revolves, at least initially, around this mysterious woman in white whom Walter Hartright meets late on a summer night, while walking down a lonely road. Walter is musing over his own thoughts when a hand is laid lightly and suddenly on the back of his shoulder. Turning around, he sees:

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road-there, as if it 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 inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. (20)

This first description of the woman in white, or Anne Catherick, as Walter later finds her to be, presents an otherworldly figure, who has descended, as Walter says, from heaven. She is dressed entirely in white, the color which is the combination of all others, reflecting the intensity of her character.

White symbolizes Anne's purity, virginity, and mental state. She quite literally is not part of this world, because she exists in a world separate from all others. It is a world that is marked by gratitude toward her former schoolmistress, the late Mrs. Fairlie, who dressed Anne all in white, and by a hatred for the baronet Sir Percival. Sir

Percival put Anne in the sanitarium from which she is trying to escape when Walter unexpectedly meets her. As Marilyn J. Kurata points out in her article "Wrongful Confinement: The Betrayal of Women by Men, Medicine, and Law," "Anne's certification as a lunatic and her subsequent confinement to a mental institution are neither demanded by society nor rendered necessary by her mental condition. She lives in uncriticized freedom till she awakens the anger of Sir Percival Glyde" (55). Walter ultimately realizes that Anne is not really insane and does not belong in a sanitarium, yet he persists in using Anne's plight to enhance a narrative which does not help Anne in any way. Anne's mysterious figure wraps all the other characters in the story around her. She is the main sensation in The Woman in White. Her appeal lies in the otherworldliness she exhibits. Her introduction into the narratives pairs her with Walter to whom she looks as a parental figure.

Collins uses the portion of the novel that contains Walter's narrative for a variety of purposes. Collins shows the reader that before Walter can possess Laura, he must first possess Anne, if not physically, at least textually, by making her supposed secret the center of his narrative. Walter textually possesses Anne by making her the sensation of the sensation novel his documents create. He exploits Anne's whiteness in clothing, reflecting her virginity and child-like mental state. Through his treatment of her, on the lonely night she escapes from the sanitarium, he proves himself to be a reasonable potential suitor for the woman he really loves. Ironically, it is later revealed that Anne is Laura's illegitimate half-sister through their mutual father, Mr. Fairlie. Walter uses Anne to prove that he is a righteous individual who is devoted to finding out her secret



because he believes it can somehow help Laura. Anne's power lies in her mysteriousness. She cannot be easily understood, a fact which Walter never fails to emphasize in his narratives. Walter does not use Anne in a sexual way. She is merely fuel to add excitement to his narrative and enhance his standing in the eyes of the reader and more importantly, in the eyes of Laura.

Anne embodies an exaggerated Victorian ideal, dressed in white, childlike and helpless, looking for a man to protect her. She is the mirror image of her half-sister Laura, who is all of these things with the additional enticement of being a wealthy member of the aristocracy. Laura can give Walter money, rank, and title, three things which Anne cannot. Anne is therefore relegated to the role of the sensation in the sensation novel.

Walter relates to the reader through the various accounts he has collected a story that is not entirely his own. By requesting each person involved in the mystery to relate in writing the role he or she played in the story, Walter serves as a psychologist, extracting buried events and emotions that other people have experienced and bringing them to the surface. The novel these narratives create serves not only to reestablish the identity of Laura Fairlie, but also functions as a catharsis for Walter himself. He is showing the world that he now possesses Laura both physically and textually. The forbidden love he felt for her has come to the surface and can be displayed publicly.

Unlike the count, who can only possess Marian by writing in her diary, Walter can possess Laura on all levels. Walter does this by controlling what the reader perceives is the truth. Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy, in "A Man's Resolution:

Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White," point out "The source of the more complete version of the truth—Walter—becomes suspect with his admission that the truth may have different guises; its nature depends, in part at least, upon its teller's and editor's intent" (397). Walter serves as the editor of the narratives he compiles. He controls what goes into the final compilation about Laura and what is excluded. He is able to textually possess Laura by having the power to manipulate what the reader takes in. At the end of the novel, Walter admits, "I tell this story under feigned names" (556). This statement is contrary to the beginning of the novel, in which he states: "the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share in a Court of Justice...the story presented here will be told...to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" (5). Walter appears not to realize that telling the story with "feigned names" is not the "most direct and most intelligible" way to tell his story as it would be told in a "Court of Justice." This example serves to illustrate the blurry distinction between Walter and Collins himself. The Woman in White was written in installments and was published in serialized form from November 1859 to August 1860. Collins could easily have forgotten something he had written eight or nine months earlier as he was finishing up his novel. Collins's discrepancy reflects on Walter Hartright, making him seem less reliable as a narrator.

At the conclusion of The Woman in White, Sir Percival and Count Fosco have both been killed and Walter has succeeded in marrying Laura, while Marian has consented to live with the two of them and take care of their new-born child. A happy ending has been revealed, and, as Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. asserts, "a rational order has

been imposed on an irrational universe.” Yet, the multiple narrations and documentations impose a greater disorder in the world of the novel because they raise questions about gender transgressions, in the cases of Marian and the count, and personal identity crises, in the cases of Walter, Laura, and Anne Catherick, where Walter is able to possess both women through the narratives he creates and compiles about them. The power battle between Marian and Count Fosco and the attempt of Walter Hartright to gain control of Laura are all played out in the written form, as opposed to the spoken word. In this instance, detective fiction has served to create new instances of unexpected disorder, where there are no easy solutions to the problems faced in the novel.

The ending of The Woman in White is only superficially happy. Perkins and Donaghy argue that “Far from retreating from the full implications of the problems that he raises, Collins is in fact suggesting their immense complexity by tacitly revealing that they, unlike melodrama, cannot be neatly resolved at the end of the book” (401). I do not believe that Collins was motivated by a wish to address these broad social problems. Instead, I believe that Collins was most interested in gaining a large audience by creating a work that is compelling to read. He uses characters and narratives to act out a fantasy that is enjoyable to read because it is both realistic and at the same time sensational. The reader is able to believe on a conscious level that the events in the novel could actually happen, even if he or she knows it is not probable that they will occur. Collins continues to use this dual style of writing in the second work of his which I critique, The Law and the Lady.

## Narrative Power in The Law and the Lady

In The Law and the Lady, Collins again explores the idea of what it means to use a text as a means of possession. While The Woman in White employs many narrators, The Law and the Lady uses only one, the main character, Valeria Woodville. Valeria serves a number of important functions in the story. As a female who controls the story, she defies gender expectations. Valeria is a textual detective, compiling documents and information in order to gain control and assert her individuality in a society which values men over women and views females as pieces of property. Valeria uses her narrative as a means to consolidate power by circumventing the established patriarchal law system. She does her own sleuthing and compiles information about the mysterious death of her husband's first wife, Sara Macallan. This is information which legal authorities were unable to discover at the time of the trial. She assumes complete control over the telling of the tale. Valeria also removes the only other character that poses a narrative threat to her, Miserrimus Dexter. Dexter, a cripple who spends his life in a wheelchair, is a friend of her husband, Eustace, and possesses information which could clear up the mystery of Sara's death.

Three years before Eustace met Valeria, he was known as Eustace Macallan and was living in Scotland with his first wife, Sara. During a time when Eustace's friend Dexter and another woman, Helena Beaulieu, were houseguests of the Macallans, Sara Macallan suddenly died of arsenic poisoning. Eustace was arrested and tried in a Scottish court of law. He was given a Not Proven verdict, which meant that the jury could not decide whether Eustace was guilty of his wife's murder. The mysterious

death of his first wife and the ambiguous sentence he is awarded traumatize Eustace, causing him to change his name to Woodville. When he meets and marries Valeria, Eustace withholds his entire history from her.

Valeria justifies her narrative control because she believes she is using her narrative to exonerate Eustace of being a murderer. She refuses to live in the shadow of the first Mrs. Macallan. According to Karin Jacobson in "Plain Cases, Weird Cases: Domesticating the Law in Collins's The Law and the Lady and the Trial of Madeline Smith," "In distinguishing herself from Sara, the first Mrs. Macallan, Valeria assumes a contradictory position in relation to the law, accepting the courtroom-produced interpretation of Sara's conduct but rejecting the judicial analysis of Eustace's involvement in Sara's death...To become Mrs. Macallan, Valeria must resurrect Sarah Macallan, then violently erase her" (296). Valeria uses her narrative as a way to assert her own identity. She was not at the actual trial, and therefore must rely on the official courtroom text of it, which she discovers at the home of another of Eustace's friends, Major Fitz-David.

Valeria's first step as detective is to read the report of the trial and find out the official information available. After reading the introductory pages, Valeria comes to the body of the document. She proceeds to take charge of the text, informing the reader that:

An Inventory of papers, documents, and articles followed at great length, on the three next pages. This, in its turn, was succeeded by the list of witnesses, and by the names of the jurors (fifteen in number) balloted for,

to try the case. And then, at last, the Report of the Trial began. It resolved itself, to my mind, into three great Questions. As it appeared to me at the time, so let me present it here. (126)

Valeria does not present an unedited version of the trial in her narrative. She instead decides, "As it appeared to me at the time, so let me present it here" (126). Just as she assumes control through her narrative, she takes control of official court documents, organizing them in the way that she sees fit. While she goes on to excerpt entire sections, she directs the reader's interpretation by adding her own comments. Even the excerpts, however, do not seem very official. They read like a narrative flashback and are in the same type of writing style as the rest of the novel. Whether this phenomenon is to be credited to Valeria or Collins himself is unknown. It is very similar to many of the shorter narratives which Collins creates in The Woman in White. These shorter narratives are designed to specifically reveal pieces of information which Collins needs to convey to the reader in order to further the plot. The minor characters who write them are largely unimportant except that they possess clues to the mystery. The trial report performs a similar function.

The trial report takes up a total of six chapters and forms a significant portion of the novel. It is based on the infamous Madeline Smith Trial of 1857, where Smith was accused of poisoning Pierre Emile L'Angelier with arsenic. The case was scandalous because Smith and L'Angelier were unmarried lovers. During the trial, however, Smith made a positive impact on the jury due to her dress and manner, even in the face of the

evidence against her. Ultimately, Madeline Smith, like Eustace Macallan in The Law and the Lady, was awarded a Not Proven verdict.<sup>i</sup>

In The Law and the Lady, Collins reverses the gender and the legal status of the accused. Unlike Smith, Eustace was married to his supposed victim. Also, unlike Madeline Smith, who presented a respectable and convincing appearance in court, Eustace is unable to defend himself and his ashamed behavior in the courtroom turns the jury against him, instead of in his favor. He acts like a criminal and is therefore treated like one. The stigma Eustace carries has the potential to be transferred onto his second wife as well. Valeria, however, refuses to become a victim of the law, which in the nineteenth century viewed women as property and not as individuals.

Valeria defies the law by using her narrative as a way to assert her individuality, showing that she is not just an object to be owned. She is determined that the disgrace which hangs over her husband will not hang over herself. This is why to clear her own name, she must clear that of her husband first. The unresolved mystery of the first Mrs. Macallan's death stands between Valeria and Eustace as a ghost from the past. As detective, Valeria must take the law into her own hands and perform her own investigation. Her first step after reading the trial report is to question those who were staying with the Macallans at the time of Sara's death. This leads her to Miserrimus Dexter, a man with no legs, confined to a wheelchair, who proves to be both her friend and foe.

Dexter is the only male in the novel who is Valeria's equal in intelligence and cunning. He understands that information is power. He holds the answers to the

mystery Valeria is so desperately trying to solve. Interestingly, Dexter's physical deformity mirrors the social deformity Valeria assumes when she takes on the role of detective and protector of her husband, Eustace. Collins manipulates gender roles very cleverly. Dexter is characterized as a feminized tyrant. He has the personality of a dictator but does not possess the legs needed to carry out his wishes. Like Walter Hartright in The Woman in White, Dexter is also an artist. But unlike Walter, who is able to use his artistic talents to make money, Dexter's artistic efforts are thwarted and his pictures are destined to adorn the dimly lit, grim brown walls of his dilapidated mansion. When Valeria first meets him, Dexter is wheeling himself back and forth across the room, shouting furiously: "I am Napoleon at the sunrise of Austerlitz!...I am Nelson...leading the fleet at Trafalgar" (206). Despite Dexter's bizarre behavior, Valeria notices that he is "an unusually handsome man" and that "a painter would have reveled in him as a model for St. John" (214). Valeria is both horrified and fascinated by the man she hopes to receive information from. Dexter is equally fascinated by Valeria. He obtains a kind of sexual pleasure by teasing Valeria. Even though he possesses crucial information Valeria needs to exonerate her husband, he does not tell her immediately, but strings her along, making her visit him many times so that he can enjoy her company.

Dexter's treatment of Valeria is reflected in the sadistic way he acts towards his servant and cousin, Ariel. At her last meeting with Dexter, Valeria enters his rooms with her friend Benjamin, who was a clerk to her late father. She finds that Dexter has tied Ariel's hands to pieces of string which he holds the ends of. He has starved Ariel



all day, much in the same way he has starved Valeria of the information she desires. Putting a plate of cakes in front of Ariel, he tells the servant to take one, but the moment she does, he jerks her hand away with the string, just like he has dangled the fact that he possesses important information in front of Valeria, only to keep it hidden. Once the game is over, he releases Ariel and gives her the cakes. Valeria notes "Ariel, silently devouring her cakes, crouched on a stool at 'the Master's' feet, and looked up at him like a faithful dog" (328). Valeria is horrified by Dexter's treatment of Ariel. Yet, Benjamin, Valeria's elderly friend, is a servant as well, although not a paid one. Benjamin serves as an escort so that Valeria can visit a single man's home respectably. It is interesting that Valeria should compare Dexter's servant Ariel to a faithful dog because Benjamin performs a similar function. He is also like a faithful dog because he can perform tricks given the right signal. Valeria has taught him a secret code whereby when she plays with her earring, he will take out a small notebook and write down whatever Dexter says. Yet, there is no sadomasochistic dimension to their relationship as there is between Dexter and Ariel. When a female is in charge, as Valeria is in the relationship with Benjamin, the element of sadism is missing. Female/male relationships are different from male/female ones.

These examples are part of a larger trend in the novel, which sees Valeria gaining power and control by using Benjamin to write down the information Dexter possesses in the form of a text, which she can then use to exonerate and ultimately gain a type of textual control over her husband, Eustace. As Eustace's friend, Miserrimus Dexter serves as an important obstacle, which Valeria must overcome.

Dexter eventually reveals the secrets of Sara's death. Because Valeria is a female, she is able to penetrate where the patriarchal law system was unable. Her female sexuality becomes an asset. She and Dexter play a word game, whereby the cripple tells her a fictional story mixed with factual information. Valeria must use her linguistic skills to discover the truth. Her persistence eventually overpowers Dexter's resistance. When he finishes his tale about a hidden letter which holds the clue to a murder, he

threw up both his hands above his head; and burst into a frightful screaming laugh. "Aha-ha-ha-ha! How funny! Why don't you laugh? Funny, funny, funny, funny. Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-."

He fell back in the chair. The shrill and dreadful laugh died away into a low sob. Then there was one long, deep, wearily drawn breath. Then, nothing but a mute vacant face turned up to the ceiling, with eyes that looked blindly, with lips parted in a senseless, changeless, grin. Nemesis at last! The foretold doom had fallen on him. The night had come. (346)

Dexter is able in this moment of insanity to realize the humor in the game Valeria is playing. He is able view Valeria's plight and laugh at it, because he himself is in a similar one. Like Count Fosco and Marian Halcombe in The Woman in White, Valeria and Dexter both transgress nineteenth-century normative boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Just as Dexter is a freak of nature for being a tyrant with no legs, Valeria is a freak as well for playing the masculine role of detective.

In her desire for information, Valeria has become Dexter's nemesis. Her overpowering desire to possess information has caused Dexter to go insane. By concealing the fact that the answer to Sara's death lies in a hidden letter, he brings about his own destruction. Using Benjamin, Valeria turns Dexter's bizarre confession into a text which she can use to further her purpose of exonerating Eustace, and ultimately, exonerating herself from the taint her marriage to a suspected murderer has brought to her reputation. To remove this stigma, Valeria must commit another social transgression by being a female detective.

According to Teresa Mangum in "Wilkie Collins, Detection, and Deformity"

Wilkie Collins...exaggerates deformity into a linguistic, structural, and thematic staging of the differences on which gender and genre depend...Miserrimus Dexter, who is born without legs and, the novel coyly suggests, without genitals...is variously Valeria's associate, her antagonist, and her sensational counterpart. (285)

Valeria and Dexter are both sexual oddities, on the outskirts of society's boundaries. As Teresa Mangum notes, being born without legs, and possibly without genitals, causes Dexter to remain permanently outside an acceptable social sphere. Valeria, however, is able to reenter an acceptable ideal of womanhood by relinquishing her investigation to her husband's former lawyer, Mr. Playmore.

Importantly, even though she may relinquish her physical detection work, she retains control and power through her personal narrative and through the information she has discovered. She controls the last steps of the investigation from home when she

becomes pregnant with Eustace's child. She directs Mr. Playmore to where the letter lies hidden. It proves to be a suicide note that Sara wrote to her husband before she died and which Dexter subsequently stole. Mr. Playmore sends the note to Valeria, who possesses the final piece of text she needs to assume complete control in her married life.

At the end of the novel, she puts the letter in an envelope and places it in her newborn child's hand. Calling her husband into the room, she writes: "With a heavy sigh, he lays the child's hand back again on the sealed letter; and, by that one little action, says (as if in words) to his son:-'I leave it to You!'" (413). Through this symbolic action, Eustace relinquishes control over his name and reputation to not only his infant son, but also to Valeria, who will raise this son. According to Teresa Mangum, "The judge in Eustace's trial pronounces a verdict that refuses closure to a marriage plot; the detective-wife, Valeria Macallan, carries out the sentence" (303). I disagree. Valeria is not merely carrying out a sentence produced by the patriarchal law system. She is defying their verdict by possessing crucial information in the form of texts—her narrative and Sara's suicide letter—which leave her not a victim of nineteenth-century law, but a powerful individual who possesses the power to publicly exonerate her husband should she need to. In this case, possessing an important text is equivalent to possessing physical and social power. Once she holds the suicide note of the first Mrs. Macallan, she has, as Karin Jacobson points out, violently erased any trace of her. In this case, control over her marriage is equivalent to personal and public power.

Interestingly, Collins does not make clear whether Valeria's narrative is a public or private document. In the beginning of the novel, Valeria tells the reader: "I must write the truth about myself, however strange it may appear" (55). Valeria uses the word "write" to mean that she must "write" about the steps she is taking to "right" the wrong that has been done to her when her husband did not reveal his history to her before their marriage. At the end of the novel, Valeria writes: "Must I shut up the paper? Yes. There is nothing more for you to read, or for me to say" (413). These two instances are the only clues, however, which Collins gives to explain the purpose of Valeria's narrative. In The Woman in White, Collins makes it very clear, through the character of Walter Hartright, what the purpose of the narratives is. In The Law and the Lady, he is not so explicit. He leaves the reader to interpret the narrative for himself or herself. As we will see in the third work by Collins I discuss, The Haunted Hotel, the author begins to lose his storytelling powers and leaves more and more of the plot to the reader to figure out, instead of explaining it himself.

## Textual Identity in The Haunted Hotel

The Haunted Hotel, one of Collins's later works, is a novella, not a novel. It is an attempt to recapture the storytelling magic he exhibited in his most successful work, The Woman in White. Unfortunately, Collins does not live up to his reputation. In The Woman in White, Collins uses a strictly realistic plot, which revolves around events that could happen in the real world. In The Haunted Hotel, however, Collins weaves in supernatural elements, which he never fully explains or resolves. The main character, the Countess Narona, continuously foreshadows her own death. From the beginning to the end of the novella, she believes she is destined to die in "the haunted hotel," an old palace in Venice where she participated in the murder of her husband.

In The Haunted Hotel, Collins borrows directly from the gothic tradition, particularly the foreign setting. While the story opens in England, much of the plot takes place in the Venetian palace, where Herbert John Westwick, Lord Montbarry, was murdered. Collins appears to regress and relinquish the innovative English setting he used in The Woman in White. The Haunted Hotel revolves around the gradual disclosure of the events which took place in the Venetian palace before it was turned into a hotel. This information is revealed in a text which is placed at the end of the novella. The text is a play Lord Montbarry's widow, the Countess Narona, writes before she finally dies. It is an attempt to free herself from the guilt she suffers because of her involvement in her husband's death.

Unlike Collins's two earlier works, The Woman in White (1860) and The Law and the Lady (1875), which feature first-person narrators, The Haunted Hotel (1878)

utilizes a third-person omniscient narration. This type of narration is less personal than Collins's first-person narrators, such as Walter Hartright and Valeria Woodville. The Haunted Hotel is like a small piece of text chipped off Collins's masterwork, The Woman in White.

In The Woman in White, Collins focuses on the issue of female mental health and insanity, connecting a woman's medical condition to the use of documents. Walter Hartright uses his connection with the mentally unstable Anne Catherick to create a compelling narrative document with which to catch the reader's attention and place himself in a position of power. He textually possesses Anne Catherick by exploiting her mysteriousness and making her the sensation of his narrative. In The Haunted Hotel, the Countess Narona becomes the sensation of her own text, the play that details her crime and causes her to go insane and die as she writes the document. The countess creates her own text in a doomed effort to gain a last semblance of control over herself. She has been haunted by Lord Montbarrly's memory. Collins explores the role guilt plays in the female psyche. In The Haunted Hotel, Collins is unable to create a character as complex as Marian Halcombe of The Woman in White. His most unique female character in the story, the Countess Narona, does not experience a violation of her personal text like Marian does. The countess has already been violated by the man she married and the act she committed as a consequence.

The Haunted Hotel begins shortly before the countess is to be married to Lord Montbarrly. Suffering misgivings about her forthcoming nuptials, she visits a respectable London physician and asks him outright: "I want to know, if you please,

whether I am in danger of going mad?" (5). She cites her reason for questioning her sanity as the guilt she has experienced after discovering that her fiancée had previously been engaged to another woman, Agnes Lockwood. After meeting Agnes unexpectedly at a luncheon, the countess unaccountably faints at the sight of her. The London physician, while interested in her case, tells the countess that he can do nothing for her (9).

Before leaving the physician's office, the countess tells him that after her meeting with Agnes, she went to her soon-to-be husband and attempted to stop the marriage proceedings. She tells the doctor:

I declared I would break my engagement. He showed me letters...all repeating reports of me in Paris, Vienna, and London, which are so many vile lies. 'If you refuse to marry me,' he said, 'you admit that these reports are true - you admit that you are afraid to face society in the character of my wife.' (9)

The countess is afraid to face society in the character of Lord Montbarry's wife, because she will always be negatively viewed as the woman who stole the fiancé of Agnes Lockwood. Even though when she initially accepted Montbarry's proposal she did not know that he had been previously engaged and when she did find out, she attempted to stop the wedding, London society will view the entire matter as her fault. The countess has become a victim of the double standard which allows Montbarry to break his previous engagement but forbids the countess to break hers if she wants to even remotely save her reputation. Either way, the countess will be damned. Lord



Montbarry holds power over the countess through the letters he has about her. He uses these documents to blackmail her into marrying him. As a woman in this precarious situation, the Countess Narona has few options left open to her. This harsh reality causes her to feel that her world is closing in on her and that she is going mad from the pressure.

From the beginning to the end of The Haunted Hotel, the countess is depicted as a woman who has foreseen her own doom. She tells the London physician in the first pages of the story that she is afraid of going mad. Ultimately, she does go mad, through her own guilt, first by marrying a man who was already engaged, and secondly by participating in his murder. Collins makes a direct link between the beginning of the story when the countess feels that she is doomed and the end of the story, when she really is. He also shows that it is not just pressure from her husband which causes this, but her own precarious mental state which allows her to be used by first one man and then another as the story unfolds.

The Haunted Hotel ends as it began, with the countess trying to extricate herself from an even more doubtful situation, that of murder. As she did in the beginning of the novella with her visit to the physician, at the end she pours out her problems. This time, instead of using a person, she uses a text, one which she creates in the form of a play about the murder of her late husband by herself and her brother, the Baron Rivar.

According to the play, once Lord Montbarry and the countess were married, they honeymooned in Italy, staying in an old Venetian palace. During this time the countess's brother, the Baron Rivar, comes to stay with them. The baron is a gambler

who is heavily in debt. He asks Lord Montbarry to pay off his debts. When the latter refuses, the baron is outraged. Shortly after this incident, both Montbarry and his courier become sick. Montbarry only has a cold, but the courier has a serious case of bronchitis and could easily die. Seeing the potential of the situation, the baron devises a plan and enlists the help of his sister, the countess. The two substitute the bodies of the courier and Montbarry for each other. Montbarry is poisoned and his body brought to the underground vaults of the palace. Next, a local doctor is called in to examine the courier, who is obviously dying. The doctor is told the man he is examining is Lord Montbarry. When his patient dies a few days later, the doctor writes the appropriate death certificate, stating that his patient died of natural causes, which allows the countess to collect insurance money.

This substitution parallels the one performed in Collins's earlier work, The Woman in White. In The Woman in White, Sir Percival and his partner in crime Count Fosco substitute the identity of Percival's wife Laura for that of Laura's mentally unstable half-sister, Anne Catherick. Count Fosco takes the weak Anne Catherick to his lodgings and introduces her there as Laura Glyde. When Anne dies of a bad heart condition, a doctor is called in and told she is Laura Glyde. Like the Venetian doctor in The Haunted Hotel, this physician writes out a death certificate, stating that the woman he examined died of natural causes. The real Laura Glyde is whisked away to a private sanitarium as Anne Catherick, and Sir Percival is free to inherit his wife's property and fortune.

In his works, Collins appears to enjoy exploring the idea of fate and destiny. In both The Woman in White and The Haunted Hotel, he shows how flimsy identity really is. It is a malleable construct which can be manipulated for personal gain. A single document—in these two cases, a death certificate—is able to change the life course of every other character in each of the novels. In The Woman in White, Walter fights to prove the identity of the true Laura Glyde because the false certificate of her death has robbed the heiress of her fortune. In The Haunted Hotel, the countess is haunted by the memory of her husband, feeling that her own identity is trapped by the actions she has committed. She is doomed because she believes there is no way to give herself an unblemished identity after she took away the identity of her husband by tricking the doctor into writing a death certificate for the wrong man.

Identity, for Collins, is directly related to narrative. In The Woman in White, the death certificate of the false Laura Glyde and the inscription on the tombstone are both enclosed within their own, individual narratives, with subheadings. In The Haunted Hotel, Collins embeds this type of information within the play the Countess Narona writes. In both cases, the reader is only able to learn information crucial to the plot by interpreting these texts within texts. His novels are like Russian nesting dolls, where one doll can be opened up only to find that it contains a second doll, which contains a third one, and so on. First, there is the text of the novels themselves. Then within these primary texts lie additional texts, such as the multiple narratives in The Woman in White, and the countess's play in The Haunted Hotel. Collins uses a multi-layered

storytelling technique which emphasizes the role documents play in the mystery story. An individual character's identity lies hidden within texts within a text.

Collins uses his technique in The Haunted Hotel to dramatize the mental deterioration of the countess. Collins appears to be saying, from a judicial point of view, that it is only fitting that the countess should not be able to finish her play and through it relieve the weight on her conscience. The last time we see the countess, she is lying on her bed, dead from the rupture of a blood vessel to the brain. She is still slightly breathing, however, even though the doctor attending her says it is only a mechanical sound which could go on for hours (119). This bizarre description of the countess's death leads one to suspect that even in death she is not really free of the doom she foretold for herself. She is the living dead. On a desk by her bedside lies a sheet of paper with outlines for a drama. Unable to finish her first play, the countess has begun it all over again. According to Collins, mental deterioration is directly linked to the inability to complete one's personal text.

The countess's inability to control her own text and destiny reflects Collins's inability to control his own text and destiny as well. Beginning in the late 1860's, Collins started taking the drug opium for medicinal purposes. He relied on it heavily and eventually became addicted to it. The effects of this drug can be seen in the decline of his writing. He first regularly began taking opium while writing The Moonstone, his second literary masterpiece, in 1868. After The Moonstone, Collins never again captured the compelling writing style which made him a household name. In the 1870's, his works declined sharply in quality. The Haunted Hotel, from 1878, one of his

last lucid efforts, shows a departure from the sensation fiction he created and a return to the gothic tradition which influenced his earliest works.

The Haunted Hotel closely resembles Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) in certain key aspects. Collins departs from the meticulous realism which characterizes The Woman in White (1860) and The Law and the Lady (1875), and descends into the supernatural. He uses what we call today shock value to enhance the dramatic appeal of The Haunted Hotel, by borrowing an idea which he appears to have got from Radcliffe. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, the main character, Emily, is terrified of a figure she sees hanging behind a black veil in the Castle of Udolpho early on in the story. Radcliffe lets the reader know that Emily has seen something shocking, but does not reveal what it is. She waits till the end of the story, when she reveals that Emily thought she had seen a figure hanging in a recess in the wall, "dressed in the habiliments of the grave" (662). The face of this figure was partly decayed and disfigured by worms crawling all over it. Then Radcliffe writes that actually Emily had not seen a real decayed human figure, but really a decayed wax body, which had served as a punishment for a religious offence committed many years ago by a resident of Udolpho. This particular individual of long ago had to contemplate, at certain times of the day, this artificial representation of the state of the human body after death (662). When Radcliffe first introduces this mysterious image behind the veil, she hints that there may be something supernatural to it, but later explains it in realistic terms. In The Haunted Hotel, Collins also uses grotesque imagery, but does not explain it in realistic terms.

In Collins's story, the countess and her former rival Agnes Lockwood are confronted by a similar image of death, when the late Lord Montbarry's decayed head appears to descend upon Agnes while she is lying in her bed. According to the plot, after killing her husband, the countess and her brother cremated his body but didn't have time to destroy the head, which they hid in the palace. After a period of time, the palace was bought by one of the deceased Lord's brothers as an investment. It was turned into a hotel for travelers. Eventually, all of the late Lord's family, the Westwicks and Agnes, who has become a governess for them, travel to Venice and stay in the hotel. They meet the countess, who by coincidence is staying there, having returned to the scene of her crime. By a strange coincidence, Agnes is given the bedroom where her former fiancée died. Initially, she is supposed to sleep in the room with one of her charges, little Marian. As she is getting ready for bed, little Marian sees a brown spot on the ceiling which she believes is a spot of blood. Terrified, she insists on sleeping with her sister in the next room and Agnes is left to sleep alone. A few hours later, Agnes awakes from a sound sleep to find the countess unaccountably sitting by her bed, looking up at the ceiling as if in a trance. Looking up, Agnes sees "midway between her face and the ceiling...a human head-severed at the neck, like a head struck from the body by a guillotine...The flesh of the face was gone. The shriveled skin was darkened in hue, like the skin of an Egyptian mummy" (96). And then Collins goes on to write:

Downward and downward the hideous apparition made its slow progress, until it stopped close over Agnes...the closed eyelids opened slowly...and fixed their dreadful look on the woman in the

chair...Agnes...saw the eyelids of the living woman open slowly...[and] saw her rise as if in obedience to some silent command. (97)

Agnes loses consciousness until she wakes up the next morning.

Collins never fully explains this incident. Eventually the head is found in a compartment in the floor of the room that is above Agnes's bedroom, but Collins does not clarify how the head descended toward Agnes, or how it opened its eyes or why the countess rose as if in some silent command. One wonders, a silent command to do what? The purpose of this entire incident is unclear, unless it is to add some kind of excitement to a story that is getting dull. Unlike Radcliffe, who explains her grotesque imagery rationally, Collins is unable to. He seems to be running out of ideas and reverting to conventions he most likely encountered years earlier in Radcliffe's works. He has broken from writing the sensation novel, and reverts to writing a weak gothic novel. His guillotined head closely resembles the kind of grotesque imagery of the waxen figure in The Mysteries of Udolpho.

Both Collins and Radcliffe shock their readers by having young females stare at images of human decay. Women were supposed to be protected from such sights. By exposing Emily and Agnes to these horrors, these authors shock the reader's sense of moral righteousness. The reader does not feel sympathy for the Countess Narona, however. She has long since transgressed the boundaries of acceptable female behavior. One possible motive for the appearance of Lord Montbarray's guillotined head, therefore, could be to punish the countess. After her trance-like experience in

Agnes's room (her strange behavior is never explained), she is compelled to write her confession, the play.

Unfortunately, even this possibility is not made clear because Collins abruptly ends the story a few pages later. The last few lines read: "Is that all? That is all. Is there no explanation to the mystery of the haunted hotel? Ask yourself if there is any explanation of the mystery of your own life and death. - Farewell" (127). When the reader gets to this point, it feels like Collins got tired of writing this particular story and sent it off to the publisher's with this little appendage at the end.

As an avid fan of Collins's earlier works, I read Collins's farewell in The Haunted Hotel as not only an end to his story, but as an end to his career as an author. He is unable to resolve plot devices which ten years earlier would not have been a problem. His predecessor, Ann Radcliffe, explains her own supernatural imagery. It is a sign of power for an author to be able to exhibit this level of control over his or her text. When Collins is unable to do this in The Haunted Hotel, it is a sign of his mental deterioration and a symbol of his deterioration as a writer. Collins's plight is expressed most directly through the character of the countess, who also is unable to control her personal text and dies as a result. I would argue that Collins does the same. Even though he does not physically die at this point in time, he dies as a writer. Collins continued to publish right up to his death in 1889, but his later works follow the trend begun in The Haunted Hotel. It is a sad fate for a writer who is often credited with writing the first sensation novel, The Woman in White, and the first detective novel, The Moonstone.



## Conclusion

At his best, Collins created a legacy of enduring characters. He uses the figure of the artist, such as Walter Hartright from The Woman In White, in a variety of ways. He endows Hartright with both masculine and feminine characteristics to make him seem more fallible and real. Walter is able to serve a parental function, providing an outlet for the subconscious to reveal itself. He is a more developed version of a character Collins originally creates in his short story "A Terribly Strange Bed," a tale which was first published in 1852, eight years before The Woman in White.

In "A Terribly Strange Bed," an artist, who remains unnamed, has been hired to paint the portrait of a wealthy man named Faulkner. At the beginning of the story, the artist writes: "Mr. Faulkner, like many other persons by whom I have been employed, took it into his head that he must assume an expression, because he was sitting for his likeness; and, in consequence, contrived to look as unlike himself as possible, while I was painting him" (1). The artist reveals that many of the people he paints believes themselves to be something they are not. Mr. Faulkner contrives "to look as unlike himself as possible" because he believes he is assuming the proper pose for a portrait. Through an unnatural expression, he contrives to mask his true nature in favor of an assumed one. It is up to the artist to find Faulkner's true nature and subsequently his true expression. Faulkner is "the most difficult likeness" the artist has "ever had to take," because he erects a barrier, keeping the artist psychologically and creatively at a distance from himself.

Once the sitter begins to reminisce about his past, the barrier he put up between himself and the artist collapses. The artist notes: "in the interest of his subject he soon completely forgot that he was sitting for his portrait—the very expression that I wanted came over his face—I proceeded towards completion in the right direction and to the best purpose" (3). The storytelling process frees Faulkner from a controlled emotional state to an uncontrolled one, where he can assume a natural expression. The artist is put into a position of power. He can manipulate his subject to give him the pose he wants by taking the sitter from outside of himself to inside of himself.

While there are two distinct roles in "A Terribly Strange Bed," that of the artist and that of the storyteller, Mr. Faulkner, the framed narrative technique reveals the artist himself to be a storyteller by relating to the reader the tale Faulkner has told him. He is similar to Walter Hartright, another man who is both visual artist and storyteller. Like Hartright, who possesses the textual body of Anne Catherick, whose story he relates, the artist textually possesses the body of Faulkner, whose story he relates to the reader. The artist also possesses the physical body of Faulkner because he is painting him and manipulating the man so that he will give the artist a natural expression.

When he has finished telling his story, about a time in his youth when he was almost killed in a gaming house in Paris, Faulkner starts in his chair because while he has been telling his story, he has forgotten he has been sitting for his portrait. He thinks he has been the worst model the artist has ever had. The artist replies: "On the contrary, you have been the best...I have been painting your expression and while telling your story you have unconsciously shown me the natural expression I wanted"

(20). The storytelling process frees Faulkner from a controlled emotional state to an uncontrolled one, where he can assume his natural expression.

The artist is an early form of Walter Hartright. Both exert control over others by relating tales. By becoming storytellers, they both assume a position of authority which they do not experience in their everyday lives as middle class artists. The storyteller is of the utmost importance to Collins. He expresses himself through characters like Walter Hartright and the artist in "A Terribly Strange Bed." These artist figures embody the artist in Collins himself. He was an artist who used words instead of paint to create a compelling portrait of human character. He reflected the nineteenth century's age of information, by writing novels where documents play a crucial role in the telling of the story. He used these documents, whether they were narratives, letters, plays or court documents, to subtly manipulate the gender roles of his characters. Characters like Marian Halcombe and Valeria Woodville defy assumptions of the time that women were naturally passive, unable to take action for themselves. Artist figures like Walter Hartright and the portrait painter in "A Terribly Strange Bed" perform traditionally feminine, expressive tasks, such as attentively listening to others and collecting information. Collins's fictional world shows a potential for a greater equality between men and women. Personal documents, whether journals, letters, or plays, give their creators power, regardless of whether the writer is male or female. Another unique contribution of Collins is that by setting his stories in England, Collins was able to successfully update the gothic novel and create a new form of literature, the sensation novel. The sensation novel stresses the importance of personal narrative,

which increases the intensity of the story. Although Collins did not ultimately fulfill the promise he showed in his most successful work, The Woman in White, his storytelling legacy lives on today and can still be appreciated in the twenty-first century.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> For further information on the Smith trial, see Karin Jacobson. "Plain Faces, Weird Cases: Domesticating the Law in Collins's The Law and the Lady and the Trial of Madeline Smith." Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins. Ed. Maria K. Bachman. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2003. 34-58.

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