

The Significance of Silence: The Muted Voices of Count Fosco and Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*

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Chapter 1: The Significance of Silence: An Introduction

Wilkie Collins was an innovator. This was proven as soon as the first excerpt of *The Woman in White* was published on November 26, 1859 in *All The Year Round*; it was one of the first “detective” novels. The main narrator, Walter Hartright, collects multiple narratives to seek justice for the crime of Count Fosco and Sir Percival, who wrongfully place Laura Fairlie in an asylum as a mad woman named Anne Catherick in order to steal her inheritance. Walter, who loves Laura, collects these narratives in the same way a lawyer would do to prove her identity as the true Laura Fairlie and to seek justice on Count Fosco and Sir Percival. Much of the criticism of the novel centers on its feminist implications, though many critics also tend to focus on the novel’s importance as one of the first detective novels. In this study, I examine an as yet under-explored characteristic of Collins’ novel: the way it discusses, analyzes, and enacts the process of reading.

Not only does Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* serve as one of the first detective novels, but the epistolary form for this mystery novel also offers a unique perspective on a difficult literary term: voice.¹ Collins has mentioned in his 1860 preface of the novel that the form “forced [him] to keep the story moving forward; and it has afforded [his] characters a new opportunity for expressing themselves” (3). Not only does this “new opportunity” help to reveal each narrator, it also reveals an internal set of narrators’ responses to other characters’ voices—responses that sometimes conflict with and modify one another. At the same time, Collins’ contemporary audience’s responses to *The Woman in White* reveal the role of characters’ voices in shaping reactions of members of the novel’s reading public. Two opposing figures, Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco, reveal the dichotomy between the contemporary audience’s reception

¹ I define voice as the best way for a reader to know about a character based on the character’s dialogue with other characters, his/her narration, and other characters’ perceptions of this character.

and the narrators' perspectives. For instance, Count Fosco is a villain in the novel but a hero among readers of Collins' time, while Laura is loved by characters in the novel whilst boring Collins' audience. Furthermore, both of these characters are relatively silent in the context of the narrative since one does not narrate at all (Laura) and the other narrates without awareness of the narrative (Fosco). Their distance from the narrative makes the interpretations the readership and narrators of the novel have of these two characters imperative to consider. Instances of such dichotomies abound within the novel and they serve to illuminate the multi-layered process by which voice contributes both to the meaning in the text and to the meaning that arises as a result of reading the text. Looking at an "internal" reading of the text versus an audience-focused reading at these two opposing figures illuminates the quality of their voices and the importance of each voice to maintain the essence² of the story.

Opposing Theories Attract: Narrative Theory and Reader-Response Theory

These two ways of approaching a text—reading through the lens of narrative theory, and reading through the lens of reader-response—are often taken to be diametrically opposed. Narrative theory, for instance, tends to focus on the context of the plot in relation to the narrators only. Three major narrative theorists—Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg—examine this dilemma of focusing on narrative theory through a "novel-centered" lens: "First, it cuts us off from the narrative literature of the past and the culture of the past. Second, it cuts us off from the literature of the future and even from the advance guard of our own day. To recapture the past and to accept the future we must, literally, put the novel into its place" (8-9). Combining these two theories actually offers a more dynamic and enriched approach to the text, especially when looking at the concept of voice. *The Woman in White*, specifically, helps to

² The story would not be possible without the villain (Count Fosco) and his victim (Laura Fairlie).

provide a framework for these theories since many of the characters serve as narrators of necessary plot information while also exuding characteristics for audiences to adore or disdain.

James Phelan further explains this necessary dynamic between both theories:

Narrative form . . . is experienced through the temporal process of reading and responding to narrative. Consequently, to account for that experience of form we need to focus on narrative progression, that is, the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics—what I have so far been calling our engagement—that both follow from and influence these textual influences. (3)

The narrative structure is further emphasized through the readers' reception of this structure. Particularly since *The Woman in White* was in serial form,³ the readers of that time were able to take in most of the main events of the novel in a secluded manner. They responded to each event as one event only, and they also read almost every narrator separately as well. This isolation provides a more thorough look into both the text and then the text's reception. Phelan discusses the effect this serial form had when he writes, "[I]t allows the author to work with clearly demarcated perspectives, and, thus, potentially with [a] whole range of techniques" (198). Serial narration allows for more flexibility with the characters, which Collins also mentioned in his preface. This flexibility provides multiple perceptions of each character's voice as well.

This narrative structure also portrays voice more acutely by providing certain characters with multiple methods of attaining a definitive voice. Phelan further elaborates, "The art [of character narration] consists in the author's ability to make the single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narrator's and the author's, or to use the technical terms, the narratee and

³ *The Woman in White* was first published in the literary magazine *All the Year Round* from November 26, 1859 to August 20, 1860 in forty increments.

the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author's and character narrator's) while also combining the one figure (the 'I') the roles of both narrator and character" (1). Thus, the narrator functions in two roles as both the character that the audience does or does not respond to and the narrator that furthers the plot. Both of these roles are important, and serve to help illuminate voice within *The Woman in White*. For many of the characters in the novel, since there is more than one narrator, they assume two voices as well. They have one voice as a narrator to the plot and then another voice they sometimes possess through their confessions in their narratives.

Though many times it seems narrative theory and reader-response theory oppose one another, James Phelan also considers the audience when discussing narrative theory in one of his works: "[...] for the purposes of interpreting narratives, the approach assumes that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways: that those designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them" (4). This perspective still focuses upon the author's control of the audience, but Phelan recognizes that the audience remains important to consider when discussing the roles of narrators.

While narrative theory attends to the text's own logic, reader-response theory attends to the reception of these characters and plots among the book's audiences. Since the author writes in order to be read, reader-response theory must also be considered. At the same time, reader-response theory draws attention to the failures that occur when analyzing a text, because it reveals the endless possibilities that each reader brings to each work. Considering Collins uses multiple narrators in his novel furthers this frustration, since they also serve as an "audience" of the crime. So, the audience of this novel must analyze different narrators' interpretation of the crime while also coming to their own conclusions about the plot and the characters. Reader-

response theorists, however, tend to have a specific motive for approaching the readership of a work. However, responding to all these theorists is not necessary for the interpretation of voice. For example, Hans Robert Jauss focuses on determining how to interpret a text through the original reception of the text.⁴ The voices of the two significant characters, Laura and Count Fosco, could then be understood solely based on Wilkie Collins' audience's interpretation of them. On the other hand, Norman Holland focuses on the readers' psychological and ideological concerns that readers bring to the text,⁵ which discredits Collins' own knowledge of his readership. Since he wrote his work serially, he was aware of the concerns of his readers, suggesting that these concerns were already integrated within the text. Moreover, Stanley Fish focuses on the reasons why a reader responds or attempts to interpret a work a certain way,⁶ which does not relate to the question of interpreting voice within an epistolary novel.

For this reason, Wolfgang Iser's use of reader-response criticism will be the most beneficial to use to determine voice within *The Woman in White*. Like Phelan, Iser understands the "gaps" that readers experience through the interpretation of meaning just as there are gaps when we only consider the work itself. Iser offers a solution to these gaps: "Thus the text provokes continually changing views in the reader, and it is through these that the asymmetry begins to give way to the common ground of the situation" (167). The text and reader's interpretation of the text then form to allow for an easier way to interpret voice, since both are important to consider when understanding Count Fosco and Laura. Iser further emphasizes the

⁴ "[A]esthetic perception is subject to historical exchange. It thereby gains the opportunity of broadening historicist knowledge through aesthetic understanding, and perhaps of constituting, through its unconstrained kind of application, a corrective to other applications that are subject to situational pressures and the compulsions of decision-making" (Jauss 988).

⁵ "It is, therefore, quite impossible to say from a text alone how people will respond to it. Only after we have understood how some specific individual responds, how the different parts of the individual personality recreate the different details of the text, can we begin to formulate general hypotheses about the way many or all readers respond. Only then—if then" (Holland 1022).

⁶ "[Y]ou know a poem when you see one because its language displays characteristics that you know to be proper to poems" (Fish 1025).

frustrations between the gaps of the reader's knowledge by using the term "wandering viewpoint"⁷ and he examines this term by writing, "The text can never be grasped as a whole—only as a series of changing viewpoints, each one restricted in itself and so necessitating further perspectives. This is the process by which the reader 'realizes' an overall situation" (68). One way to better focus on interpreting a text using reader-response theory is by having a specific audience in mind, particularly the original audience the author had. Peter Rabinowitz writes, "We live in a world with a history and traditions, and [...] it is impossible to forget all that has happened when a text was written and the time when it was read" (1050). Since Collins wrote the novel serially first, his readers affected his own initial writing of the work.⁸

At the same time, reading in this fashion can prove limiting. Iser raises the inadequacies of only viewing a text through the lens of a single reader because "[t]he reader [...] can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it" (167). The reader is limited in his own perceptions, so an individual reading a text cannot come to a specific conclusion about the meaning of the text as a whole. Thus, while narrative theory attends inadequately to the text's real reading audiences, reader-response theory alone does not provide enough attention to the internal dynamics of a text: what happens in the novel. Both are necessary to attain a stable, meaningful reading. Yet Iser answers the question of how the reader can finally come to a more unbiased perception when he writes, "Thus the text provokes continually changing views in the reader, and it is through these that the asymmetry begins to give way to the common ground of a situation" (167). Both the dynamics of the text itself and the reaction of its readers, particularly

⁷ "The relation between text and reader is therefore quite different from that between object and observer: instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend. This mode of grasping an object is unique to literature" (Iser 109).

⁸ In Collins' 1861 preface to the novel, he wrote, "Some doubt has been expressed, in certain captious quarters, about the correct presentation of the legal 'points' incidental to the story, I may be permitted to mention that I spared no pains—in this instance, as in all others—to preserve myself from unintentionally misleading my readers" (6).

its initial readers, offer a “common ground” for analysis.

Binary Opposites: Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco

Another binary occurs within the the novel’s narrative structure; Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco are presented as opposing figures: the weak victim (Laura) and the wicked villain (Fosco). Laura Fairlie proves herself a binary opposite to Count Fosco through narrators such as Marian’s and Walter’s depictions of her. These depictions provide her with the voice the readers of the novel know. The readers must then trust the perceptions of the narrators who have spoken to Laura and know Laura well. Throughout the novel, narrators depict Laura as a weak and helpless woman. For instance, Walter tells Marian, “Examine her publicly, or examine her privately, [Laura] is utterly incapable of assisting the assertion of her own case” (560). Despite this incapability which made audiences of Collins’ time despise her,⁹ many of the characters express their love for her delicate nature. At one point in the novel, Walter mentions to Laura, “You have many friends who love you, Miss Fairlie. Your happy future is the dear object of many hopes. May I say, at parting, that is the dear object of my hopes too?” (126). While narrators present Laura as a typical “damsel in distress,” they present Count Fosco as a peculiar and original villain. His strange adoration of his pets and his obesity conflict with other depictions of his intelligence and wickedness. Sue Lonoff provides key information surrounding Wilkie Collins’ readership in her work, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship*. In this work, she includes an interview with Edmund Yates when Collins explains that he decided to make Count Fosco fat because “[he] had begun to write [his] story,

⁹ “‘Laura Fairlie fails to inspire us,’ wrote the Dublin University Magazine bluntly (Page, 105), and Margaret Oliphant declared that Laura entirely loses the ‘sympathies of the reader . . . after the very first scenes’ (Page, 120). Passive irresolute, dependent on her nurse, her sister, her future husband, and her guardian, Laura personifies the submissive wife promoted by conventional ideology” (SurrIDGE 161).

when it struck [him] that [his] villain would be commonplace, and [he] made him fat in opposition to the recognized type of villain” (91). The narrators constantly show their surprise at his villainy because of his incongruous appearance. Count Fosco’s contradictory movements and appearance make him a shocking figure, but the audience of Collins’ time period found these contradictions intriguing.¹⁰

An example of the necessity for multiple critical lenses for these two characters occurs in the text itself, when Count Fosco, Madame Fosco, Sir Percival,¹¹ Laura, and Marian Halcombe¹² discuss crime in an old boathouse. This discussion occurs during Marian’s narrative, and exemplifies the core differences between Laura and Fosco in their values. While the structure of the plot separates them as victim and villain, their values also separate them as well. This conversation is one of the only ones where Laura and Fosco directly interact with one another, and these are plainly their viewpoints from the discussion. After Count Fosco criticizes Sir Percival on his belief that the boathouse would be a good place for murder, he says that only a fool would choose that location. Laura, infuriated by this, replies, “To describe them as fools only, seems like treating them with an indulgence to which they have no claim, and to describe them as wise men, sounds to me like a downright contradiction in terms. I have always heard that truly wise men are truly good men, and have a horror of crime” (231). Laura’s overgeneralization in her use of the word “always” signifies the sheltered life she has lived up until this point. People in her life, such as Marian and Walter, have tried their best to shelter her from the world, and so she has this innocent belief in crime. Count Fosco, on the other hand, emphasizes his point more clearly after she says this: “The fool’s crime is the crime that is found

¹⁰ Charles Dicken later wrote in *All the Year Round* of the character of Fosco: “Mr. Collins won the hearts of all fat men by showing that, under favourable conditions, both intelligence and villainy of that higher kind which demands mental power, may coexist with an enormous mass of adipose tissue” (396).

¹¹ Laura’s husband, who takes her inheritance after placing her in an asylum as Anne Catherick.

¹² Laura’s half-sister and closest companion who serves as the second major narrator.

out; and the wise man's crime is the crime that is *not* found out" (232). Rather than focus on what is right or wrong, the Count's core values focus on what is foolish or wise. He puts his intellectual pursuits and his ability to influence others above reproach.

Eventually, Marian takes over the conversation for Laura, and Laura merely interposes with comments such as, "Quite right, Marian. Well thought of, and well-expressed" (234). While Count Fosco finally agrees that Marian and Laura have beaten him in the debate, he still states, "Ah! I am a bad man, Lady Glyde, am I not? I say what other people only think; and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath" (236). Even though he claims they won, he still explains that he is better than most because he chooses to be honest and say what "other people only think." He again finds that his ability to show this courage makes him better than others. While this discussion proves that Fosco and Laura are in opposition to one another, merely looking at their views does not provide the significance of their opposition. Marian begins to explain this significance in the commentary she has as a narrator: she illustrates the interpretive maneuvers of narrative theory.

Though Laura speaks for herself during this portion, Marian again takes control of the conversation, revealing herself to be an interested reader with opinions of her own. She is a narrator well aware of her audience. In Marian's first interference into the conversation, Laura says that she believes "[c]rimes cause their own detection" (232), and Marian states, "'I believe it, too,' I said, coming to Laura's rescue" (232). She only mentions that she is coming to Laura's rescue without saying whether she sides with her or not. This statement reveals that Marian will automatically side with Laura's opinion, and her attempt to win the discussion against Fosco is only for Laura's sake. Though the rest is mainly a dialogue, Marian notices small and significant

moments the Count has during the conversation. At one point he “shrugged his shoulders, and smiled at Laura in the friendliest manner” (233). At another time, she noticed he “stroked one of his white mice reflectively with his chubby little finger” (233). Towards the end of the conversation was another eccentric moment: “‘Chocolat à la Vanille,’ cried the impenetrable man, cheerfully rattling the sweetmeats in the box, and bowing all around” (234). These moments indicate that the Count has complete control over the discussion through his cheerful manner. Only a narrator as thorough as Marian would pick up on these moments.

Marian is one of the most reliable narrators in the novel, so she reveals the logic of the narrative mostly accurately. However, the reader is also aware that some of her perceptions fall short in this depiction of the scene in the novel. Because of Marian’s trustworthiness, the narrative, and particularly this segment, helps to construct the audience’s portrayal, yet her eagerness to protect Laura and the hatred she feels towards Sir Percival and the Count nevertheless would open a gap between her interpretation and that of the book’s original readers. In other words, Marian reveals a space between the logic of her narrative and the audience’s reaction to it. Jenny Bourne Taylor writes of the limits of the narrators of the novel:

The reader is told at the start that the story will be unraveled through the subjective perspective of the linked testimonies of the different narrators—that their eyewitness accounts are empirically accurate but partial. Suspense and excitement are generated and maintained by the way that the reader’s view is limited at any one time to the perspective of each individual narrator whose testimonies are at once reliable and unreliable, and whose means of making sense of the world needs to be continually questioned. (100)

The reader goes into the story, and particularly this scene, knowing that Marian will favor

Laura's side, even if she sides too strongly with the most innocent view of crime. Marian's experiences as the character override her ability to narrate the story accurately because of the feelings she has accumulated for the Count and Sir Percival.

We can see the ways in which Collins' original audience's interpretation differed from Marian's by considering the representation of the audience's Victorian ideals in this discussion of crime. For instance, the novel's narrative structure was created in a way to mirror that of the courts of that time period. Lisa Surridge writes, "[I]n its serial structure, its preoccupation with evidence, its multiple narratives, and its focus on domestic secrets and their exposure, *The Woman in White* declares its intimate relation to the very genre of divorce court journalism" (135). Collins, in an attempt to be authentic to his time period, used this multiple narrative structure to portray the legal journalism of that time period. All of the narratives combined were to create the essential truth of the novel that Laura was innocent, while each narrative taken separately falls short of direct authenticity. Another important depiction of Victorian ideals is Laura herself. Sue Lonoff writes, "Walter's choice of Laura is a clear reflection of Victorian priorities. Typically, too, Laura's appeal is strengthened by the trials that make her pathetic and dependent and place him in the role of her protector" (144). For this instance, Marian is her protector instead. Her inability to stand up for herself also reflects Marian's own need to compensate for this weakness of Laura's.

Finally and most importantly, while Marian's narrative sets up Fosco as the villain, the reception of the novel proves that Fosco's own opinion of crime may fit more accurately with those of Collins' readers and even Collins himself. Lonoff writes that "Wilkie Collins, for example, was not just a writer of mysteries and thrillers but, rather, one who sought to please a specifically Victorian audience. Like his fellow novelists, he was conscious of a bond between

himself and his readers, and that consciousness affected every aspect of his novels, from format to content to significance” (2). Collins sought to please his audience, so Fosco obviously did not prevail in this novel or even in this scene. This “bond” helps to explain the importance of narratively protecting the innocent Laura while still giving Fosco a voice and his opinion of crime. Marian does not comply with Collins’ own opinion for the sake of Laura in order for Collins to also comply with Victorian “priorities.” However, Lonoff also reveals that “Count Fosco and Marian Halcombe [...] gratified Victorian expectations” (26). Though Fosco and Marian oppose each other during this incident, Fosco’s opinions are stronger than Laura’s. Lonoff writes, “Collins later declared that Fosco’s theory of crime was his own. Nonetheless, as a law-abiding author, he was bound to punish Fosco not only to satisfy his claims of justice but also to satisfy his readers. So he contrived Fosco’s murder, which has nothing to do with Marian and Laura, but arises instead from his treachery to an Italian brotherhood that finally exacts retribution” (102). Collins knew that he must appease his audience by having good prevail over evil, but he did not want the Count to lose to them directly. Charles Dickens wrote of the Count in a later excerpt of *All the Year Round* in support of his theory of crime.¹³ In this way, Collins is able to provide Count Fosco the appeal to the audience that he deserves while allowing the weak Laura to claim back her true identity with much help from Marian and Walter.

In order to define voice through the two most opposing characters, narrative theory *and* reader-response theory are imperative to use together. A significant difference lies within the text’s own logic and the culture it lives in. These two critical frames enrich the quality of defining voice in this novel. Count Fosco is not only the evil influencer within the story; he is

¹³ "Count Fosco, in his rich, unctuous way, took the liberty of laughing at the well-meant but exceedingly silly saying that 'Murder will out,' and pleasantly pointed out that, because now and then a murder is discovered, foolish people conclude that therefore all murders 'will out.' The opinion of the Count is borne out by disquieting facts" (396).

one of the most beloved villains of Collins' time. On the other side of the spectrum, Laura is one of the most loved characters within the novel, but late Victorians merely viewed her as a device that conveys the female oppression of their time period. These two characters assist with their opposition to create a range for the other characters, since their voices must be on the most opposing sides based on their circumstances and roles. Both narrative theory and reader-response theory need a basis to use as an example of their theory, which is why they are able to work together, in competing and differing ways, in the context of *The Woman in White*.

Chapter 2: The Necessary Narrators: The Minor Voices of *The Woman in White*

One major problem with the form of an epistolary novel such as *The Woman in White* stems from the need to have multiple narrators. While these narratives offer the audience a chance to gain privileged knowledge via eavesdropping and secret meetings, the novel does not cohere because of these multiple viewpoints. Each narrative provides only a partial solution to most of the plot conflicts, and many of the narrators do not actually care about the mystery, the main characters, or even Laura and Count Fosco, who serve as the victim and the villain of the novel. Still, although these multiple viewpoints disjoint the plot, they also provide a wider spectrum for understanding the mystery itself.

These multiple perspectives also create a division within the narrative structure by separating the facts of the narrative from the emotions surrounding them. Main narrators such as Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright present themselves more as characters that use their emotions to strengthen or weaken their viewpoints within the context of the plot. At the same time, other narrators who speak only briefly provide the facts more exclusively. These minor narrators, then, have the most awareness of the plot itself. For example, while Walter collects these narratives to help further Laura's reclaiming of her identity, he still reveals much of his own character and personal agenda within his narrative. Meanwhile, most of the other narrators present the facts, possibly with some minor details of their grievances of writing or issues with other characters, because Walter told them to do so. The minor narrators of the novel thus aid in giving a more objective view of Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco while providing necessary plot information that Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright are unable to give.

Critics have noted this tension between Collins' need to further the plot and his desire to create audience appeal. This tension is exacerbated by the novel's use of the sensation/mystery

genre.¹⁴ Sue Lonoff emphasizes this “problem” when she writes, “Unfortunately, the ‘dissective property’ was not so much a weakness *per se* as the by-product of a more basic problem, narrowness of scope. However effectively they function, Collins’s characters subserve the demands of the plot and rarely rise above it” (26-7). Aside from narrators like Marian and Walter, these characters “subserve the demands of the plot” because they must remain consistent with the story; they are limited by the structure of the narrative. This consistency comes from the fact that Walter has asked them to present their own perspective of specific events. The characters cannot reveal too much information about themselves without becoming unfaithful to the story they are asked to narrate. Tamar Heller presents another problem that critics have had with this faithfulness to the story: “According to most critics, *The Woman in White* demonstrated that Collins was a master of construction but deficient in the portrayal of character; one of the most hostile, calling him a ‘manufacturer of stories,’ dismissed his plots as type of soulless modern machinery” (110). However, the problem with the “portrayal of character” may stem from the pattern in which the minor narrators faithfully fit into their roles as characters in the context of the novel; their job is to relay the information that they know and then allow the next narrator to move on with his or her part in the narration in furtherance of the plot.

Although these narrators create problems for the unity of the plot, they also serve as a stand-in for the readers of the novel, since they do not share the apparent omniscience that the author or the prevalent narrators (Walter and Marian) possess.¹⁵ The biases of these two major narrators reveal a wider gap between the readers of Collins’ time and their ability to understand

¹⁴ “However, as writers like Ellen [Mrs. Henry] Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charles Reade and Collins himself produced more and more works of murder, adultery, bigamy, poisoning and mistaken identity, the decade came to be referred to as the ‘age of sensation’. Although today the term is a useful shorthand, for the Victorian reader and critic, the term ‘sensational’ was often a loaded one” (Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore 5).

¹⁵ Furthermore, these issues with unity within this text never fully resolve to begin with according to Wolfgang Iser: “But in a fictional text, which by its very nature must call into question the validity of familiar norms, how can this ‘common ground’ be established, in order for the communication to be ‘successful’? After all, the ultimate function of the strategies is to *defamiliarize* the reader” (87).

the voices of Laura and Count Fosco. These minor narrators, however, bridge the gap between characters such as Laura and Anne Catherick, for the most part, whom we cannot understand except through dialogue and the perceptions of others. Lonoff writes of how this narrative structure works within the novel: “Dramatic monologue is another technique by which Collins persuades the reader to act on what he observes—to perceive the incongruity between statement and implication” (125). The reader is therefore able to interact with the perspective of these minor narrators while not feeling necessarily engaged by them, as the critiques of the characterization would make it seem. For this reason, the minor narrators are best looked at exclusively for the perspectives they offer of the characters of Laura and Count Fosco and the purposes of their narration.

The minor narrators of the novel fill in the gaps of the plot. Their purpose, unlike Marian’s and Walter’s, does not involve the readers of the time liking them. While a narrator such as Frederick Fairlie provides humor he is still not a likeable character. D.A. Miller explains the significant role these characters serve as minor narrators:

[T]he novel makes nervousness a metonymy for reading, its cause or effect. No reader can identify with unruffled characters like Gilmore or Mrs. Michelson, even when they narrate parts of the story, because every reader is by definition committed to a hermeneutic project that neither of these characters find necessary or desirable. Instead we identify with nerve-racked figures like Walter and Marian who carry forward the activity of our own deciphering. (151)

Marian and Walter, as the major narrators of the story, also control the plot. Therefore, readers of the time naturally empathize with them as Walter and Marian explore the mystery. Along with the gaps in their narratives, their nerves make them unreliable so that they cannot be the only

narrators of the story. Wilkie Collins writes sensationally while attempting authenticity by mimicking the discourse of the courts of the time period.¹⁶ He then has characters created solely for plot and characters created solely for narration in order to create this effect of authenticity. Walter Hartright, in his narrative, even admits, “It is the necessary law of such a story as mine, that the persons concerned in it only appear when the course of events takes them up—they come and go, not by favour of my personal partiality, but by right of their direct connection with the circumstances to be detailed” (565). Therefore, the narratives necessitate the progression of the plot first of all, while the characterization of each narrator holds more or less importance for the readers of the novel.

Many of these objective accounts surprisingly attest to a unique similarity between Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco: both are well-liked despite being oppositional. Laura’s and Count Fosco’s opposition creates neutrality between them, and the mid-point between the poles they represent helps to guide the audience reliably through the story. Narrative theorists such as James Phelan locate this neutrality within the role of an “observer narrator”: “An observer narrator’s quest for the story that he or she tells can itself become part of the represented action, something that significantly affects the authorial audience’s response to the narrative” (199). Since most or all of the minor narrators are ignorant of Count Fosco’s crime, they do not necessarily have to choose sides. These narrators contribute to the plot, however, and strongly affect the original readers’ perception of it because of the serial form, as the readers would spend exclusive time with these minor narrators’ segments. D.A. Miller further examines this idea that minor narrators and readers share similar wandering viewpoints of the plot of the novel:

Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860)—of all sensation novels the best

¹⁶ “The sensation novel, then, can be seen not so much as a unique cultural experience of reading ‘strange revelations’ about cruelty in the middle or upper classes, but as sharing in the formal properties and structure, the ideological challenges, disturbances, and social revelations of divorce court journalism” (SurrIDGE 152).

known, and considered the best—seems at any rate an exemplary text for making this case. For what ‘happens’ in this novel becomes fully clear and coherent only, I think, when one takes into account the novel’s implicit reading of its own (still quite ‘effective’) performative dimension and thus restores sensation to its textual and cultural mediations. (149)

While the audience reads Wilkie Collins’ novel, they are also interacting with the reading of those minor narrators who had a fairly objective, although biased, viewpoint. This viewpoint links the minor narrators to the readers since they are encountering what is happening in the story with almost the same distant mindset. Furthermore, Collins’ original readers received the novel in serially published installments that would sometimes feature one narrator exclusively, making at least the one increment they could have in one sitting appear unified and objective. However, because of the crime and the process of the crime, the readers must eventually choose sides while the narrators do not. Ultimately the context created by these multiple viewpoints sets up the opposition between Laura and Count Fosco, and the minor narrators’ stories allow the audience to choose for themselves, not simply trust the biased opinions of Walter and Marian.

Narratives Used Explicitly to Further the Plot

The narrator in an epistolary novel typically plays two roles: the role of narrator and the role of the character. Certain narrators in *The Woman in White*, however, serve only the role of the narrator, and these narrators’ stories, clustered around one particular incident in the novel, provide a key example of Collins’ narrative logic. These specific narratives take place when Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick switch places, and Anne dies of an aneurism in Count Fosco’s home. No one else besides the narrators, Count Fosco, Madame Fosco, and Anne know what

happens during this key moment of the novel. The two main narrators (and characters) of the novel obviously cannot attend such a moment or else the mystery of Laura's disappearance in the asylum will not occur. Walter Hartright, therefore, collects certain narratives that prove unessential to furthering the characterization of the novel but pivotal to resolving the narrative tensions and creating plot closure. In order to remain consistent with the narrative structure, Collins has these characters provide these accounts of the story, since the only other way they could be given would be through the Count. Though the Count admits to this incident at the end of the novel, these straightforward accounts confirm the Count's own narrative without the embellishment he gives to it.

The beginning of this section, which examines the monumental scene of the novel, begins with the title, "The Story Continued in Several Narratives" (399). Hester Pinhorn, Count Fosco's cook, writes the first of these narratives. Before going on with her narrative, she begins with a confession of her own character. Although these narratives do not provide any great significance of characterization for the novel, Wilkie Collins still maintains that these characters are not merely static but have their own unique personalities. This act of maintaining also helps Collins remain consistent with the multiple narratives of the novel. Hester begins with the confession that she cannot read or write and then says, "I know that it is a sin and a wickedness to say the thing which is not; and I will truly beware of doing so on this occasion" (399). Her fear of wickedness and her neutrality to the mystery itself assures readers that she is a narrator who can be trusted. She also provides the necessary information for the narrative based on her attendance of this key time of the novel: "All I know is, Lady Glyde came; and, when she did come, a fine fright she gave us all, surely" (399). Though her neutrality shows she can be trusted, her ignorance to the mystery itself proves that she can be wrong. She believes that the woman who

came to the house is Lady Glyde only because the Count and Madame Fosco told her that she was Lady Glyde. This ignorance is further illustrated after the Count explained “Lady Glyde” had a serious heart disease: “He told [his wife] exactly what he thought was the matter, which I was not clever enough to understand. But I know this, he ended by saying that he was afraid neither his help nor any other doctor’s help was likely to be of much service” (400). She explains her inadequacy of understanding the illness as an expert, but she also shows through this explanation that most of the time she was close to the Count or Madame Fosco while they were in the house. Therefore, her explanation that she did not see the Count alone with “Lady Glyde” gains the readers’ trust.

Hester Pinhorn has the longest narrative out of all the narrators in this section since she also gives accounts of her perceptions of “Lady Glyde” and Count Fosco. She was with the Count, his wife, and Lady Glyde for the longest period during this particular event. She describes her first impression of Count Fosco: “He was a big fat, odd sort of elderly man, who kept birds and white mice, and spoke to them as if they were so many Christian children” (400). Her description of him coincides with earlier and later depictions of him. However, this description holds more importance because she is the most impartial observer who provides this description. While she says that he is “odd,” she also admits, “I liked him a deal better than my mistress” (401). These depictions once again portray him as a loveable villain. Pinhorn also provides depictions of the supposed Lady Glyde as well: “She was but a frail thing to look at, poor creature! Very little strength, at any time, I should say—very little strength” (401). Though Pinhorn does not know that the woman is not Lady Glyde, the depiction she provides of her mirrors other depictions given of Laura Fairlie of her frailty. She is not emotionally invested in the death of Anne Catherick and is only a servant of Fosco’s, so her opinions confirm the

accounts of the more biased characters' depictions.

Her account provided necessary information for the novel simply because she was present at this important event. She was also there with Madame Fosco when the doctor pronounced Anne dead, and she was able to overhear her say, "[D]ead so soon! What will the Count say?" (403). Though she is ignorant of this remark, Collins' intended audience would understand that she would not mean only that Lady Glyde/Laura Fairlie was young. This statement also conveys that the Count and the Countess wished her to remain alive a little longer so there is no conflict with the dates of when they received Anne Catherick and when Lady Glyde would actually leave Blackwater Park. Further along in the narrative, Hester Pinhorn reveals the whereabouts of Sir Percival, of which Walter and Marian would otherwise be ignorant if she did not explain what she overheard from the Count and Madame Fosco. Pinhorn states, "The dead lady's husband was away, as we heard, in foreign parts. But my mistress (being her aunt) settled it with her friends in the country (Cumberland, I think) that she should be buried there, in the same grave along with her mother" (404). Laura's husband did not even bother to attend her funeral, which again proves Pinhorn provided a limited yet relevant narrative. While Sir Percival cares little for Laura, he cares even less for Anne Catherick which is certainly why he felt no need to attend the funeral even for the Foscos' sake. The most important information she gave in her spoken narrative to Walter was the list of three that she provided at the end of her narrative:

- (1) That neither I nor my fellow-servant ever saw my master give Lady Glyde any medicine himself.
- (2) That he was never, to my knowledge and belief, left alone in the room with Lady Glyde.

(3) That I am not able to say what caused the sudden fright, which my mistress informed me had seized the lady on her first coming into the house. The cause was never explained, either to me or to my fellow-servant. (404)

This list ensures that Fosco did not murder or even harm Anne Catherick (assumed to be Lady Glyde) in any way. However, this information also shows that Pinhorn was also ignorant of the illness and was not a credible medical source. Her expertise in this field, however, proves unnecessary because of the other three accounts given.

Aside from Hester Pinhorn's narrative, the narratives in the rest of the collection are much shorter, and serve only to establish the credibility that Lady Glyde allegedly died in Fosco's home. The doctor writes, "I hereby certify that I attended Lady Glyde" (404), which provides a formal account of the doctor's presence. He further explains that "the cause of her death was Aneurism. Duration of disease not known" (405). Much like Hester Pinhorn, the doctor seems trustworthy, but he is also ignorant of the mystery and even the identity of the woman he declared dead. Jane Gould also provides her account of her death and states, "I remained with it, and prepared it at the proper time for the grave" (405). These accounts seem arbitrary because they only provide factual information of this scenario. While we are used to interacting with loveable characters who also serve as narrators (Walter and Marian), these characters do nothing but provide necessary information that would be missing otherwise. At the same time, in doing this, they help Collins' audience to piece together a reliable understanding of the workings of his plot.

The Comical Narrator

Besides providing important plot information, Frederick Fairlie holds a unique role as the

comic relief for the novel. His role as the guardian of his niece and the selfish hypochondriac both prove necessary for the progression of the plot, and as mechanisms that both appeal to and repulse those who read the novel. His ridiculousness allows the readers to laugh at the misfortune of the mystery. Collins writes of this juxtaposition of humor and misfortune in the novel itself when Walter states, “Through all the ways of our unintelligible world, the trivial and the terrible go hand in hand together. The irony of circumstances holds no mortal catastrophe in respect” (526). Frederick Fairlie, through his selfish motives, allows his niece to marry Sir Percival with a terrible marriage settlement and then also allows Count Fosco to bring Laura back to Limmeridge House. Without this coldness he feels towards anyone other than himself, Laura may not have gone through what she did. His disbelief and unwillingness to accept Laura as herself at the end of the novel is also the primary reason why Walter must arrange this narrative in the first place. His character also serves as the mode for comic relief since the exaggeration of his illnesses and selfishness makes his character ridiculous. For example, he writes, “It is the grand misfortune of my life that nobody will let me alone” (338). He writes this concerning helping his own niece restore her identity. The only thing he can think of is the way anything will affect his life in an uncomfortable way, even if it only discomforts him by having to spend a few hours writing a narrative. His relationship with his servant Louis further provides comic relief. One instance of their comical relationship is when he writes, “[W]hat I can’t remember and can’t write, Louis must remember, and write for me. He is an ass, and I am an invalid: and we are likely to make all sorts of mistakes between us. How humiliating!” (338). Though Frederick Fairlie is selfish and appears to treat Louis in a cruel way, he still displays a certain tenderness towards his servant by admitting that they are alike in their humiliating natures.

During his narratives, Frederick Fairlie writes of his experiences with Laura and Count

Fosco. Since he already finds the narrative a burden, it is not surprising that he says of Laura, “She is a sweet girl. She is also a dreadful responsibility” (345). He uses the term “sweet” to admit that he is aware of her amiable qualities, but he also detects the “responsibility” she can be because of her helpless nature. Furthermore, he discusses how tiresome Count Fosco is when he writes, “He had said so much already in spite of me; and he looked so dreadfully capable of saying a great deal more, also in spite of me” (353). This statement indicates the ridiculousness of Fairlie’s character, but it also conveys how easily and apathetically Fairlie chooses to do what is best for him rather than what is best for Laura. Her “sweetness” does not make up for Fairlie’s own nervous temperament. Frederick Fairlie then presents his opinions of both Laura and the Count within the same sentence: “I determined to get rid of the Count’s tiresome eloquence, and of Lady Glyde’s tiresome troubles” (355). Frederick Fairlie does not present any opposition between Laura and Count Fosco because they are both the same to him. He only understands one binary himself: those who tire him and those who leave him alone.

Familiar Figures

On the other hand, narrators such as Eliza Michelson and Vincent Gilmore provide their own information with clear opinions of the other characters and convey the quirks in their characters that make them more memorable. Both of these narrators provide the longest narratives given by the minor characters. Their involvement with both Laura and Marian grants them the opportunity to give beneficial information based on their occupation (housekeeper and solicitor). Marian could not present these parts of the story because of her illness at Blackwater Park and limited understanding of the law. Since these characters have more time than the others, they are able to present their personalities and opinions of the other characters more

clearly. For instance, Eliza Michelson conveys her faith in God throughout her narrative, and her faith further separates her from the other characters within the narrative. D.A. Miller discusses nervousness as an important element of the novel and remarks on Michelson's participation, or lack of participation with this element in the novel: "Nervousness is our justification in the novel, as Mrs. Michelson's faith is hers, insofar as it validates the attempt to read, to uncover the grounds for *being* nervous" (151). Michelson's faith distances her from the themes of the novel and the time period, which therefore distances her from Collins' intended audience who would have been familiar with this idea of nervousness, especially with women.

Eliza first begins her narrative like Hester Prynne. She presents the reason Walter wishes her to write this narrative: "I am asked to state plainly what I know of the progress of Miss Halcombe's illness and of the circumstances under which Lady Glyde left Blackwater Park for London" (357). Collins presents each purpose in this manner to show that this was supposed to be the reason for her narrative, although she may stray from her overall purpose at times. Another aspect of her narrative that resembles Prynne's is her establishment of her credibility. After she explains that her late husband was a preacher, she states, "I offer facts only. My endeavor through life is to judge not that I be not judged" (359). This statement positions her as a trustworthy narrator, although she changes this perception for the audience when she provides her own judgments (which she said she would not provide) in her narrative.

Later in the narrative, her hypocritical and hypercritical nature makes it so that she needs to explain herself when she overhears the conversation of Sir Percival and the Count concerning his trips to the lake to find Anne Catherick. Her nosiness and hypocritically judgmental nature provides progression for the plot for keeping what Sir Percival and the Count are about to do with Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie. She excuses herself for listening to their conversation by

stating, “We are poor erring creatures, and however well established a woman’s principles may be she cannot always keep on her guard against the temptation to exercise an idle curiosity” (361). She makes sure to say that her principles are “established” in order to show that she still is the good-natured woman she presents herself to be. Michelson, however, is unable to provide what would have been the most important part of the narrative. She narrates, “I made no memorandum of the time, and I cannot therefore be sure to a day of the date” (357). Her narrative’s main purpose was to provide this date in order to prove that the Count made Laura and Anne switch identities. If she were able to give this date, there would be no need for the rest of the story. Her inability to remember actually lengthens the plot and creates for a better story. Michelson again feels the need to explain herself when she writes, “We all know the difficulty, after a lapse of time, of fixing precisely on a past date, unless it had been previously written down” (357). This statement explains her own character by allowing her these excuses. She must include herself with everyone in order that the issue with her narrative will not be judged. Though she makes excuses for herself, she does offer this statement: “I heartily wish my memory of the date was as vivid as my memory of that poor lady’s face, when it looked at me sorrowfully for the last time from the carriage window” (398). Her forgetfulness did depress her, which is why she must make excuses for herself. This explanation also reveals her own regrets concerning Laura, as she is the “poor lady” according to this excerpt and other narrators as well.

Eliza Michelson provides her own accounts of Laura and Count Fosco from her faith-driven standpoint by favoring Count Fosco and finding Laura weak and mostly useless. Eliza Michelson first explains why she has such reservations for the Count when she states, “The only person in the house, indeed, who treated me, at that time or at any other, on the footing of a lady in distressed circumstances, was the Count. He had the manners of a true nobleman; he was

considerate towards everyone” (359). The Count enchants Eliza Michelson as he enchants others throughout the rest of the novel. This ability supports the idea that he is a masterful villain, and he uses this ability with Eliza Michelson. She describes him as having a “truly Christian meekness of temper” (358). Other characters such as Walter and Marian find this calming behavior eerie and telling, but Michelson finds that this quality is “Christian.” Her opinion links to the biased opinion she allows herself to have: “I did not suspect the Count of any impropriety—I knew his moral character too well” (361). Though she did not know the Count well at all, the fact that he paid attention to her as a house servant in such a manner made her feel as though she did. Since he acted towards her as though she was important, she also felt as though she was important enough to understand him.

Michelson does not show as much bias toward or against Laura, although she shows signs of liking her or at least pitying her. One annoyance she had of Laura was Laura’s need to feel as though she was helping when Marian was ill. Michelson states that “[s]he was much too nervous and too delicate in health to bear the anxiety of Miss Halcombe’s illness calmly. She only did herself harm, without being of the least real assistance. A more gentle and affectionate lady never lived—but she cried, and she was frightened, two weaknesses that made her entirely unfit to be present in a sick room” (358). Therefore, Michelson is fond of Laura to a certain extent, but she still finds her uselessness frustrating. Her delicate nature makes her likeable but ultimately helpless. Michelson is able to provide this opinion of Laura in a more objective manner since she was not close to her but still liked her. She was also there to see Laura’s already weak nature before the Count took her to the asylum. When Laura hears that Marian is beginning to get over her serious illness, Michelson narrates, “The effect of the good news on poor Lady Glyde was, I grieve to say, quite overpowering. She was too weak to bear the violent

reaction; and in another day or two, she sank into a state of debility and depression, which obliged her to keep her room” (372). Laura could not even handle the good news concerning Marian adequately. This delicate nature shows Laura’s own inability to stand up for herself, and this explains why she needed the love of Marian and Walter to prevail in the novel and could easily attain it due to her likeable nature.

Michelson’s character as a hypocritical woman while writing the narrative helps to portray certain events in a more revealing way than if someone else narrated. When Sir Percival and the Count ask Michelson to run an errand in Torquay in vain, she writes, “[T]hese circumstances were more than unusual—they were almost suspicious” (378). Since she still holds this biased view of the Count, she will not be outright suspicious of him, but she still writes this in her narrative so that the audience can still have these suspicions. Since Marian and Laura were not in a state to write of these events and both were unaware of the reason, Eliza Michelson is the best person to explain this account which is why multiple narratives are so important for the progression of the story. By the time she comes back, Marian has been moved to another location in order to trick Laura into leaving since Marian has already left Blackwater Park. After Laura had been tricked, Eliza Michelson writes, “I was sorry for her—I was indeed heartily sorry for her all the time” (387). Michelson offers a unique perspective on both of these characters because she was still able to feel pity for Laura while still refusing to think anything but the best of the Count. Though their roles as victim and villain place them in opposition to one another, people in the novel can still accept both of them. However, this acceptance may only be because of their ignorance of the mystery at hand, as Walter and Marian have the most comprehensive knowledge of the mystery.

Vincent Gilmore, as the solicitor of Laura Fairlie, represents the law with more

sensitivity because of his connection to her. Though he does not help Laura as much as he should, he still conveys regret within his narrative, which shows that he did not abide by the law in a heartless manner. Gilmore is the one who allows Laura to go through with her marriage settlement with Sir Percival, which he presents as being a highly disagreeable arrangement. Miller portrays Gilmore's conflicts with his occupation when he writes, "The novel's only character with strictly judicial habits of mind is the lawyer Gilmore, who judges only to misjudge" (158-9). Though he seems to be aware of some future issues with Laura's will, he does not provide her with any protection. Gilmore states, "No daughter of mine should have been married to any man alive under such a settlement as I was compelled to make for Laura" (161). However, he still allows Laura to go through with such a settlement though he has known her most of her life. Pickett further elaborates on Gilmore's inability to intercede in Laura's later traumatic events when she writes, "Gilmore in *The Woman in White* is a decent enough fellow, but morally blinded by that 'great beauty of the Law' which enables it to 'dispute any human statement, made under any circumstances'" (122). The "moral" obligations he has for Laura seem to elude him, so Collins has the ability to explain Laura marrying someone under this settlement. On the other hand, this moral obligation of Gilmore's is not the only issue:

Of course, Gilmore is also blinded by class and by gender: he is more inclined to accept the word of a male member of the aristocracy than of an enfeebled girl. As far as Collins is concerned, their tendency to identify with the social status quo is one of the main problems with lawyers. They tend to be insufficiently questioning of those with social power, and universally suspicious of those without it. (Pickett 122)

Therefore, Gilmore perpetuates the issues and reality of the law that Collins articulates in the

beginning of this novel¹⁷. His inability to look beyond Laura's "nervousness" and the power Sir Percival holds over his future wife prevent him from helping Laura in the apparent way he would help his own daughter.

Vincent Gilmore, as a solicitor, takes a more technical approach to his narrative and also describes his contribution to the narrative before beginning. He states, "The plan [Walter] has adopted for presenting the story to others, in the most truthful and most vivid manner, requires that it should be told, at each successive stage in the march of events, by the persons who were directly concerned in these events at the time of their occurrence. My appearance here, as narrator, is the necessary consequence of this arrangement" (127). His word choice of "necessary consequence" suggests his experience with the law. Though he is a man of the law, and the novel ultimately comments on the failures of the law, Wilkie Collins still conveys him as a sympathetic man because of his own pity that he must abide by the law as her solicitor. Gilmore conveys his own character succinctly when he writes, "I can make no excuse for myself; I can only tell the truth, and say—so it was" (145). Gilmore, as a solicitor, does not attempt to justify himself as characters such as Eliza Michelson and Frederick Fairlie do. Instead, Gilmore depends on the truth to depict him as he apparently is. After explaining his own role in the narrative, fully aware that he is narrating, Gilmore explains a few important aspects of Laura Fairlie's will that are important for the plot of the novel. He explains that the inheritance "was derived under her father's will, and it amounted to the sum of twenty thousand pounds. Besides this, she had a life-interest in ten thousand pounds; which latter amount was to go, on her decease, to her aunt Eleanor, her father's only sister" (149). This information presents the first connection between Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco, although this connection conveys no importance at this given

¹⁷ "If the machinery of the law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of attention in a Court of Justice" (Collins 9).

moment to the readers or to Gilmore. Since Count Fosco is married to Eleanor, this information first informs why he would assist Sir Percival in destroying Laura's identity.

Though Gilmore's only real contribution to Count Fosco's voice in the novel is the reason he decides to wreak havoc on Laura, Gilmore presents a great amount of information on Laura that connects the Laura as we know her from the present to the past Laura when she was only a girl. After grieving over the fact that he allowed Laura to go through with this marriage settlement, he writes, "Sad! To remember her, as I did, the liveliest, happiest child that ever laughed the day through; and to see her now, in the flower of her age and her beauty, so broken and so brought down as this!" (144). While Laura seems rather weak for her age during the time of the novel, Gilmore's depiction of her as a child presents this fragility and gay naiveté of life as endearing. He further remarks that "[s]he is a sweet loveable girl, as amiable and attentive to every one about her as her excellent mother used to be" (128). This connection to her mother also portrays her in a more endearing light as she is compared to someone who is to be respected and admired. However, Gilmore again preserves her in her normal fragile state when he narrates, "The poor girl looked so pale and sad, and came forward to welcome me so readily and prettily, that the resolution to lecture her on her caprice and indecision, which I had been forming all the way up-stairs, failed me on the spot" (141). Again, her innocence makes it so that another narrator fears giving her any ill news or conveying the honesty of a situation. As he portrays Laura as she used to be, he provides a likeness that she has to Anne who constantly refers to the days with Laura's mother. This likeness that Anne and Laura share may also be part of the reason why Laura also resembles Anne's fragility and weakness in such clear way. Gilmore suggests this weakness when he writes, "Still clinging to the past—that past which I represented to her, in my way, as Miss Halcombe did in hers! It troubled me sorely to see her looking back,

at the beginning of her career, just as I look back at the end of mine” (145). Much like Anne, Laura also clings to the past. Anne clings to the past only in a way that Laura would not because of the possibility of a future she has with Walter and Anne. However, Anne’s desperate connection to the past differs from Laura’s because Gilmore, a man of the law, can still empathize with this past.

A Letter from the Past

Though Anne Catherick only writes a letter to Laura within the narrative, this letter signifies Anne’s more substantial contribution to the story. D.A. Miller elaborates on this significance when he writes, “We identify even with Anne Catherick in her ‘nervous dread’ (134), though she is never capable of articulating its object, because that dread holds at least the promise of the story we will read” (151). We encounter Anne Catherick’s own dread by catching a glimpse into her own mind through the letter that she writes. Even her dialogue with Walter at the beginning of the novel provides more for the story than Laura, who remains within the story without actually being able to act or be a part of the story other than as a victim. Anne writes her letter in the same way that Count Fosco contributes to the narrative, unaware of the context of their voices. Laura does not and cannot write in the story, even though she is the most significant character as the victim and the reason for the narrative in the first place. Horrible circumstances happen to her, yet she never causes anything or changes anything. She acts as a static character that cannot act or even write because “the fight over how to possess and repossess her is bound up with the struggle carried on by other figures of the novel” (Taylor 100). However, her doppelganger engaged with the narrative through this letter in an attempt to help Laura, as most of the narrators do. Anne even writes, “I don’t give you this warning on my account, but on

yours. I have an interest in your well-being that will live as long as I draw breath. Your mother's daughter has a tender place in my heart—for your mother was my first, my best, my only friend” (80). The focus remains on Laura, but Anne's role as narrator allows her to interact with those who read Collins' work. These narratives revolve around avenging those who wronged Laura, but Laura remains so fixed within the story of the novel that even her doppelganger reveals more of her own character to the audience than Laura does.

Conclusion

One important way that these narrators help to display the voices of Laura and Count Fosco is that their objective viewpoints and overall ignorance of the mystery itself neutralizes the duality of their voices. Without the context of the mystery, Laura and Count Fosco are not opposing figures. Through these multiple objective viewpoints, Collins enforces how much the circumstances of their lives not only require multiple narrators to access, but also showcase the ways in which one key scene or plot point can produce many true but limited interpretations. Given how much Wilkie Collins focused on story in his writing, it only makes sense that the circumstances of the story links directly to what one can perceive of any given character within the novel.

Chapter 3: Misconceptions of a Watercolor Painting and Love of Mice: Walter Hartright's Contribution

Walter Hartright serves an important role in the narrative as the conductor of all of the other narratives in the novel. The epistolary form in the Victorian period normally was used for practical reasons. The form serves to collect multiple accounts in order to provide proof for seemingly unexplainable events. In *Dracula*, for instance, the multiple narratives combine to prove the supernatural existence of Count Dracula. In *The Woman in White*, the narratives Walter Hartright collects serve to reconstitute Laura Fairlie's identity. Though Walter is absent from the text for over a hundred pages, he begins and ends the novel as the ultimate collector and arranger of these narratives for Laura Fairlie's sake.

Walter's ultimate power over the narrative and his own awareness of his narrative provides him with a stronger connection to the audience than the other characters have. Tamar Heller explores this importance of Walter's role:

Yet even though Marian's voice has a greater centrality [...], Walter Hartright's voice has greater textual significance. It is Hartright who claims the right to 'guide' the reader (379) and to unravel the 'tangled web' of the conspiracy against Laura, since it is he who is editor as well as author. As editor-in-chief of the novel's many narratives, Hartright has the power to solicit writing from other characters, to arrange the order of the narratives, and even to delete what seems extraneous. (115)

Because the audience begins and ends the narrative with Walter Hartright, he is the voice that the audience initially trusts. While these other narrators comment on their own experiences of this mystery, the audience still waits for Walter to comment on how this pertains to the mystery as a

whole because he has the overall guiding voice. Gregory Currie writes of the nature of narrative: “Narrative represents things as being a certain way, and the way they represent them is what is true according to the narrative” (50). While Currie is speaking of the way the author collects the narrative, Walter provides a unique role as the collector of the narrative while being a character within it—an author within the text. His occupation as an artist further provides him with an opportunity to mirror the overall “author” of the novel. Collins uses Walter as the primary author who collects other narratives with his purpose of helping Laura in mind. He also writes the majority of the narrative himself, and begins and ends the narrative so that his purpose of writing his own narrative remains within the other narratives as well. Taylor writes that “[Walter Hartright] seems to be replacing divine judgment with empirical evidence that emerges as both reliable and relative; absolute morality with contingent experience” (110). The credibility that Walter has pertains to the other narratives that he collects. However, his choices to omit or leave in certain parts of the narrative still provide him with the ultimate control. Those who read *The Woman in White* accept Walter Hartright as the one who is communicating this narrative by “representing” the information in the way that he needs to in order to resolve the issue of Laura’s stolen identity.

Furthermore, Wilkie Collins’ intended audience would have trusted Walter as a figure with narrative significance, but also as a character of the middle class. His role as an artist pertains to those who originally read it, and Tamar Heller writes of this significance:

This emphasis on the rise of the artist is reinforced by his literary significance within the text; not only does Hartright’s narrative begin and end the novel, but he is also the editor of the other first-person accounts that compose it, a role as guardian and interpreter of the ‘truth’ of the conspiracy against Laura Fairlie that

has led one critic to identify him as the novel's "rhetorical hero." (111)

This "rise" provides him with an interesting perspective among upper-class characters within the novel. He is not a mere servant as some of the other narrators are, nor is he someone of high authority. The middle ground he possesses allows him to serve as a medium between both of the worlds in order to resolve the crime. Once he does marry Laura and achieves high status because of their marriage, the audience also triumphs with him as his commitment to the mystery provides him with a reward by the end of the novel.

Consequently, the readers must choose to trust Walter with what he has omitted or put into the narrative himself, and he earns this trust, in a way, by supporting such a delicate and helpless person as Laura. Though Laura does not receive as much attention from critics and readers, her voice ultimately establishes the credibility of Walter since he puts his faith in restoring such a helpless person's identity. Critics Mary Donaghy and Pamela Perkins explain, "Although he claims a social and legal sanction for his narrative, the novel itself provides ample clues that the defence of this authority is a hidden agenda in Walter's narrative" (n.pag). He is the one who is constructing the narrative to provide this legal account that Laura Fairlie is still alive, not Anne Catherick. However, this compiling of accounts is the only way Walter arguably functions in the novel, since he leaves for great parts of the story. His determination helps to restore Laura's identity, of course, but Walter's main, and arguably, sole function to the plot itself is his role as the central narrator. His purpose revolves around commenting on and collecting the actions of the novel rather than contributing to these actions himself.

Walter's role as key narrator is even questioned by some critics since he does leave the narrative for quite some time in order to leave the country so that Laura can marry Sir Percival. Lewis Melville writes, "In *The Woman in White* the hero disappears at a critical moment for

nearly a volume—without being missed, too. Laura, presumably, is the heroine, yet Marian is the more marked figure” (n.pag.). This observation makes it seem as though Walter only comments on the plot from afar without being a part of it. Furthermore, his comments are not necessary for a good portion of the novel. On the other hand, like Laura, Walter’s presence does not disappear completely since Marian and Laura rely so heavily upon him. Marian writes in her narrative during the time Walter is missing from the pages of the novel: “In a trance or day-dream of my fancy—I know not what to call it—I saw Walter Hartright” (334). Though Walter Hartright has not been in the novel for some time, Hartright’s presence is still there. The whole narrative is conducted because of him, so even though he may not have been a part of the actual narrative or written all of the narration himself, his influence upon the whole collection of narratives makes him essential and proves him to be an important figure. Currie writes of readers’ trust in the hero of narratives: “But if we are only a third of the way through the story and the author would be faced with narrative difficulties as well as a rebellious readership if the hero died at this point, we may be confident that the hero is not going to die—though the author might wish us to be more uncertain” (54). While Currie discusses the death of the hero, this confidence is felt by readers when Hartright leaves for so many pages. Because he began the novel by writing, “This is a Story of . . . what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (9), the readers trust that this will not be the last time he is present within the narrative. Since he is the one who began the novel with the intention that he would finish the narration in hopes of vindicating Laura from her wrong, one can assume even through his missing presence at this time that he will show up again and vindicate Laura.

Though Walter is the “editor” of the narrative, he does not fully participate in its action. Because of his absence, he sometimes does not understand the complexity of the mystery at

hand, and he does not perceive Laura and Count Fosco in a correct manner. Walter, as an interpreter of the events that take place in the novel, also has gaps in the mystery because of this absence. However, readers of the novel understand that he is the collector of the complete narrative, so he fills in the gaps of the mystery through his own implied reading of the other narratives. In the novel, Laura Fairlie's sketchbook and Count Fosco's love of mice are important attributes that convey their characters and Walter's misconceptions of them. Laura's shy dismissal of her drawings¹⁸ conveys her own childlike nature, while Count Fosco's tenderness towards mice contradicts his own villainy. Sue Lonoff writes of the importance of these attributes in the Victorian period: "And Laura Fairlie's sketch-book, into which she inserts a lock of hair for Walter Hartright the day before she marries Sir Percival, is a domestic prop as evocative for Victorian readers as Fosco's more exotic mice and cockatoo" (83). These "props" do not only serve as recognition of domesticity of the time, but they also serve as a way to help Hartright misjudge these two characters. While the sketch-book itself ensures that there is more to Laura than Anne because of this ability and desire she has to paint, Count Fosco's love of mice also serves to throw off Walter with his judgments towards the Count. Because of Fosco's little peculiar tendencies, Walter falls under the same spell as characters such as Mrs. Clements and Eliza Michelson and therefore does not accept how treacherous and capable Count Fosco actually is.

Laura Fairlie

When Walter first meets Laura, he is enchanted with her beauty. He finds her delicate and helpless personality at first endearing. Walter loves her completely within the first moments

¹⁸ "Mr. Hartright, I find myself looking over my sketches, as I used to look over my lessons when I was a little girl, and when I was sadly afraid that I should turn out not fit to be heard" (54).

of meeting her. He says that she “possessed . . . all the charms of beauty, gentleness, and simple truth that can purify and subdue the heart of man” (65). He writes that she is “all” of every good thing to prove right from the start that he will be clearly biased throughout the rest of the novel. He even admits his bias through his descriptions of her: “The poor weak words which have failed to describe Miss Fairlie, have succeeded in betraying the sensations she awakened in me” (64). His inability to control his own emotions in this moment never ceases even when he actually takes the time to write this narrative down. He cannot disconnect who Laura truly is from the way he perceived her the first time that he saw her.

Walter’s initial misconception of Laura derives from this first romantic encounter with her, and he chooses to immortalize the moment he first sees Laura through a water-color portrait of her. Mary Donaghy and Pamela Perkins state, “Her identity, Walter implies, can be summed up by nothing more than a water colour portrait of her; her ability to fit into the role of a charming and innocent young girl is more important than the individuality he is supposedly reclaiming” (n.pag). From the beginning, Walter freezes his perception of Laura as a beautiful woman in his mind. This perception, however, fails him by making him view her only in this light. By the end of the novel, he has many reasons to doubt Laura’s own strength and even her identity. However, he refuses to relinquish his first impression of her after she changes from a delicate and beautiful figure to an emotionally distraught, helpless woman. Walter argues against this weak perception he has of Laura at first by writing, “In those few words she unconsciously gave me the key to her whole character; to that generous trust in others which, in her nature, grew innocently out of the sense of her own truth. I only knew it intuitively then. I know it by experience now” (54). He tries to force readers at the beginning of the narrative to accept that his initial judgments of her good nature were not irrational, since his “experience now” also

portrays her nature as “generous” and “innocent.”

Walter at the beginning of the novel, more than anyone else, depicts Laura as a delicate and good-natured person. Even Marian, who loves Laura, cannot separate Laura from her weak and helpless nature in the way that Walter can through his first interactions with her. When Laura does not want Walter to see her sketchbook, he states, “She made the confession very prettily and simply, and, with quaint, childish earnestness” (54). Others take these actions of hers in the rest of the novel as indicative of her weak nature, such as when Eliza Michelson suggests that she is mostly “useless” while attempting to help Marian during her illness. However, this excerpt from Walter’s narrative makes Laura appear to be delicate in a positive sense. He connects her childlike behavior to goodness and honesty instead of linking her at once to Anne Catherick’s disturbingly fragile state. Another example of this perception is when Walter hears Laura laughing: “Miss Fairlie laughed with a ready good-humour, which broke out as brightly as if it had been part of the sunshine above us, over her lovely face” (53). In both of these instances, Walter comments on her beauty and links this, again, to goodness. This association shows how his first initial encounter of this beauty, which he then tries to recreate in his watercolor painting, prevails over any ill thoughts he can have for her.

Instead of giving the audience the benefit of the doubt by letting Laura provide her own account of what is going on in the novel, Walter Hartright asks that the people he is writing to love her for his sake. For example, he writes of Laura after he explains the water-color portrait he painted of her from that specific day:

Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine, with the one matchless look which we both remember so well. Let her voice speak the music that you once loved best, attuned as sweetly to your ear as to mine. Let her

footstep, as she comes and goes, in these pages, be like that other footstep to whose airy fall your own heart once beat time. Take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy; and she will grow upon you, all the more clearly, as the living woman who dwells in mine. (53)

He asks the readers to love her for his sake, but he does not believe her strong enough for her own voice. She is important to the novel as a static character, almost as a symbol for the novel to reference, but she is never expected to grow throughout the novel.

Subsequently, Laura's lack of narration limits the audience's chances of actually interacting or caring about her predicament for her own sake. Woloch writes, "Narrative flatness, in fact, produces a disjunction between 'personality' and 'presence,' dissociating the full weight of interior characters from its delimited, distorted manifestation" (24). While the readers of the time get Walter's "personality" despite his absence from the plot, Laura Fairlie's "presence" is constantly referred to by all of the narrators. While Walter Hartright is the "personality," Laura motivates the novel's action. Walter constantly talks for her throughout the narrative, even with personal reflections that he cannot possibly know or understand on his own. Once Sir Percival is dead, Walter comments, "Laura knew that his death had released her, and that the error and the calamity of her life lay buried in his tomb" (551). He remarks on the "error and calamity of her life" as though he can make this judgment on her life. Even this "calamity" does not happen because of her actions, but the actions of others. Walter assumes the role of others such as Sir Percival, Count Fosco, and even Frederick Fairlie by assuming that he knows what is good and bad for her without the need to allow her to speak. Furthermore, towards the end of the novel, Walter resignedly writes, "Whatever comes of this confidence between us, whether it ends happily or sorrowfully for *me*, Laura's interests will still be the interests of my life" (558). He

writes that his interests are her interests, but he never allows her to explain what her own interests are. Instead, he asks his audience to trust his knowledge of Laura is thinking even though we are not left with her own thoughts and perceptions.

One important way Walter's perception of Laura helps to convey her voice is the means by which he separates Laura's voice from Anne's. Lisa Surrige writes of Walter's predicament in attempting to sever the ties between the likeness of Anne and Laura: "The novel's most sensational scenes pivot on this fragility of class identity, as when Walter sees Laura 'become' the woman in white" (163). Not only does Anne impose a weak-minded nature upon Laura, but as the audience comes to see Laura as Anne or "the woman in white," they deprive her of her position in society, which foreshadows the time when her identity and position will actually be robbed of her. He spends many pages of his narrative both denying and sometimes accepting the close likeness they share. However, the primary means by which Laura does not appear to succumb to Anne's insanity is Walter's admiration for her. D.A. Miller assumes Walter's admiration for Laura stems from his first meeting with Anne on the road as she runs away from Sir Percival. Miller writes, "Accordingly, the Laura Walter most deeply dreams of loving proves to be none other than the Anne who has been put away. It is as though, to be quite perfect, his pupil must be taught a lesson: what is wanting—what Laura obscurely lacks and Walter obscurely wishes for—is her sequestration in the asylum" (174). Before Laura enters the asylum, the likeness shared between Laura and Anne does not solidify completely. Walter even suggests, "To associate that friendless, lost woman, even by accidental likeness only, with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature who stands looking at us now" (62). He does not express within these lines that he does not agree that they share a likeness. Instead, he denies this likeness for the sake of Laura's future which is nonetheless

tainted because of their shared appearance. Walter elaborates on this shared appearance while looking at Laura:

Although I hated myself even for thinking such a thing, still, while I looked at the woman before me, the idea would force itself into my mind that one sad change, in the future, was all that was wanting to make the likeness complete, which I now saw to be so imperfect in detail. If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning remarks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflexions of one another. (97)

This "likeness" occurs once she returns from the asylum after she receives this "sorrow and suffering" from losing her own identity. Walter's wish to deny the similarities between Anne and Laura allows him to believe wholeheartedly Laura is not Anne Catherick at the end of the novel. He writes, "If we had loved her less dearly, if the instinct implanted in us by that love had not been far more certain than any exercise of reasoning, far keener than any process of observation, even we might have hesitated" (433). He does not hesitate, however. Instead, Walter spends the remainder of the narrative fighting for Laura and collecting these other narratives so Count Fosco will rightly restore her identity by admitting to his crime.

Though Walter fights to restore Laura's identity, his feelings for her shifts from dazed admiration to a tired resignation to her fate. When he returns from his travels and finds Marian and the supposed Laura, he writes that she is "[a]live with the poor drawing-master, to fight her battle, and to win the way back for her to her place in the world of living beings" (413). Walter remarks that he must "fight her battle," which proves the class struggle between them is no longer relevant, since she is "robbed of her station in the world" (414). Once Marian helps Laura

escape from the asylum where they believe her to be Anne Catherick, Hartright attempts to confirm that he has “[n]ot the shadow of suspicion” (413) that she was Laura Fairlie.

Unfortunately, his earlier depictions of his love for Laura do not provide credibility for him in this area. His all-consuming love for Laura does not make him the most credible narrator, which is why others must narrate in certain instances to prove that it is not only the perceptions of Marian and Walter on which we should rely. But, he is the only one, apart from the Count, to write in the third epoch, confirming we will believe him by the end of the narrative.

Furthermore, his love for her changes once he resolves to marry her. Instead of treating this moment with the tenderness he first feels for her through his portrayal of her watercolor portrait, he instead views this as an agreement that locates him more within the story than he originally was before. Laura, surprisingly, is the one who brings up the prospect of marriage to Walter after she talks to Marian. She asks him, “[W]e may own we love each other, now?” (560). Though he does not allow her to convey her own miseries about the asylum or the triumph she felt when she no longer belonged to Sir Percival, he does allow her to speak of her own happiness about their marriage. On the other hand, he does not dwell on their marriage. Instead, he says, “The course of the narrative, steadily flowing on, bears me away from the morning-time of our married life, and carries me forward to the end” (562). He spends pages describing her beauty in his first narrative, but he does not have any more time by the time he gets to the end of the narrative to speak of their marriage to each other, which provides him with a clearer reason to interact with the crime. This resignation and passivity remain consistently throughout the rest of the narrative after he has married Laura. He begins to understand the Laura that most of the other narrators and the general audience perceive by the end: “Whatever sacrifices it cost, whatever long, weary, heart-breaking delays it involved, the wrong that had been inflicted on her, if mortal

means could grapple it, must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help” (435). When he first met Laura, he could only understand the water-color portrait of her, not how tiresome it could be to deal with her tragedy knowing her actions are almost as limited as the depiction of her in the painting. He even admits this when he tells Marian “she is utterly incapable of assisting the assertion of her own case” (560). He must go through her turmoil without her even though it is *her* turmoil. In this sense, her fragile state mirrors the state of her half-sister, Anne Catherick.

While many of Walter’s judgments of Laura seem incorrect, his determination in helping her endures throughout the novel until he succeeds in restoring her identity. Ann Cvetkovich explains, “[Walter Hartright] is, after all, more central to the novel both as narrator and as character than his claims to pluralism and disinterestedness admit” (25). Rather, his interest in Laura allows him to compete with the overall disinterestedness of the audience towards Laura because he is the easiest to understand in the novel. Judy Cornes writes, “The artist/painter is one of the more sympathetic characters in a work sorely lacking in estimable individuals” (115). He stands out as an individual because he does not directly fit in the story except for his love for Laura. Jenny Bourne Taylor writes of his ability to overcome this gap between him and the story of the novel:

The tensions of *The Woman in White* hinge on the destruction and re-forming of Laura’s identity, but the narrative devices by which it generates and resolves them make it also the story of Walter Hartright’s social and psychological transformation—of his progress from marginalized lower-middle-class drawing master to the father of the heir of Limmeridge and revitalizer of the stagnant and incipiently morbid Fairlie family. As his name obviously and emblematically

suggests, Hartright operates as the voice of safety, normality, and ‘right feeling’ in the novel. (108)

Only at the end of the novel is Walter able to overcome his middle-class status and lack of involvement with the story itself. This inclusion, however, only occurs in the last few pages of the novel. While he does not necessarily merit inclusion up until this point, his “voice of safety, normality, and ‘right feeling’” warrant the readers’ trust in him as the collector of the narrative. He, like the other minor narrators, relates to the audience as a watcher of these events with his interaction with the plot occurring after the fact. His great love for Laura compels the story and also makes the story possible, while Laura’s story alone can also be said to make the story possible.

Count Fosco

Walter’s misconception of Laura receives the most critical attention since Walter’s misconception of Count Fosco causes him to merely ignore the Count. For a great part of the third epoch, Walter ignores the true villain of the novel for his weaker counterpart: Sir Percival Glyde. Walter’s viewpoint wanders from Count Fosco because Sir Percival is Laura’s husband. At this time, he cannot overcome his biases to focus on the purpose of restoring Laura’s identity. Heller writes, “Hartright’s hatred of Sir Percival Glyde, which he characterizes elsewhere as ‘blind hatred and distrust’ (71), is the mirror image of Anne’s hatred for Glyde; similarly, Hartright’s ‘vindictive’ hatred of the landed gentry allies him with the women’s campaign to vindicate their rights as he takes their part in helping to prove Laura’s identity” (127). Again, his role as an artist serves as a way for him to empathize with the misfortunes of Marian and Laura. Sir Percival’s illegitimacy, however, does not link to resolving Laura’s identity, but the final

result of this mystery ends the marriage of Sir Percival to Laura, so Walter can marry her. Since Walter's end goal was not to cause Sir Percival's death, which would have been the only beneficial thing to come out of spending so many pages on this matter, this pursuit was not as purposeful as pursuing the Count, who ultimately succeeded in committing the crime of placing Laura in the asylum as Anne Catherick and allowing Anne to die of an aneurism as Laura Fairlie, so Sir Percival and Count Fosco could inherit Laura's money.

Hartright, at first, does not understand the role the Count serves in this mystery. Though he initially goes after Sir Percival because he is the weakest out of the two, he does not understand he is a mere pawn the Count uses in order to get his own money. Fosco destroys Laura's role in society in order to receive ten thousand pounds. This heartless nature is lost on Walter initially, which is why he chooses to place them on the same ground. Before choosing to pursue Sir Percival, Walter tells Mr. Kyrle, Laura's working solicitor of his determination:

She has been cast out as a stranger from the house in which she has been born—a lie which records her death has been written on her mother's tomb—and there are two men, alive and unpunished, who are responsible for it. That house shall open again to receive her, in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the gravel that lie shall be publicly erased from the tombstone, by the authority of the head of the family; and those two men shall answer for their crime to ME, though the justice that sits in tribunals is powerless to pursue them. I have given my life to that purpose; and, alone as I stand, if God spares me, I will accomplish it. (445)

Walter, obviously, cares more for Laura's circumstances, and so his first attempt at avenging these men would be to hurt the man who directly hurt her. Since Sir Percival was her husband,

Walter cannot live knowing this man could hurt her in this way, especially given his own love for Laura.

However, even after Sir Percival dies, Walter still does not change his initial misconceived notions about the Count. He does not worry about his malicious behavior in the way Marian does. When Marian sees the letter from Count Fosco given to them by Mr. Kyrle, she tells Walter, “[I]f ever those two men are at your mercy, and if you are obliged to spare one of them—don’t let it be the Count” (448). Walter’s reading of this letter is his first correspondence, although one-sided, with the Count. Instead of taking these words the way Marian does, he instead says, “He is trying to frighten you—a sure sign that he is frightened himself” (448). Since his closest rival is Sir Percival, given Walter believes they are rivals in romance with Laura, he does not treat Count Fosco as the true villain in the novel. After they receive this letter, the Count once again warns Marian in person. He warns Walter through Marian: “He has a man of brains to deal with, a man who snaps his big fingers at the laws and conventions of society, when he measures himself with ME” (548). Count Fosco presents himself in an egotistical manner that Marian still finds alarming. When Marian tells Walter of the encounter she has with the Count, he says, “I suspect him of merely attempting to frighten you, by threatening what he cannot really do. I doubt his power of annoying us, by means of the owner of the Asylum, now that Sir Percival is dead, and Mrs. Catherick is free from all control” (548). He underestimates the power that the Count has, since he was missing from the pages where the Count shows his true nature and what he is capable of. Walter further narrates, “Her conviction that the man’s hateful admiration of herself was really sincere, seemed to have increased a hundredfold her distrust of this unfathomable cunning, her inborn dread of the wicked energy and vigilance of all his faculties” (549). Walter writes of her exclusively in terms

of worrying about the Count. Rather than accept the Count's true nature as an eccentric villain, Walter adamantly denies this voice.

Walter holds these misconceived notions about the Count until he finally meets him at the final epoch of the novel. During this period of time, Walter builds up enough courage to face him even after he realizes what the Count is capable of. Walter writes of this despair just before going out to find him: "I know that the last chance of restoring her to her place in the world lies at the mercy of her worst enemy, of a man who is now absolutely unassailable, and who may remain unassailable to the end" (561). Though he knows the Count is Laura's "worst enemy," he still writes that he "may remain unassailable," suggesting his refusal to give the Count as much credit as he seems to deserve ends up helping them in the end. When Walter sees the Count for the first time, he writes, "Marian had prepared me for his high stature, his monstrous corpulence, and his ostentatious mourning garments—but not for the horrible freshness and cheerfulness and vitality of the man" (566). His jovial nature allows him to succeed until this point of the novel because of others who underestimate his villainy because of his "horrible freshness." Another instance where Walter learns of Count Fosco's true nature occurs when he sees him at the theater: "He looked about him, at the pauses in the music, serenely satisfied with himself and his fellow-creatures. 'Yes! yes! these barbarous English people are leaning something from ME. Here, there, and everywhere, I—Fosco—am an Influence that is felt, a Man who sits supreme' If ever face spoke, his face spoke then—and that was its language" (569). Not only does Fosco have a nature that contradicts his malicious behavior, he also has a great awareness of his own capabilities. However, unlike others who underestimated Count Fosco before, Walter accidentally uses his misconceptions to help restore Laura's identity.

Walter succeeds despite underestimating the Count because the Count also

underestimates Walter and his passionate allegiance to Laura. Once Walter enters Fosco's house to ask him to confess to his crime, Count Fosco states, "You and I, Mr. Hartright, are excellently well-acquainted with one another by reputation. Did it, by any chance, occur to you when you came to this house that I was not the sort of man to be trifled with?" (586). Count Fosco believes highly in his own capability of villainy. Unlike Laura, who never affirms or denies her fragile nature, Fosco constantly affirms his own perception of himself which is much like other narrators, apart from Walter. However, Count Fosco also holds a wrong perception of Walter by believing so highly of himself. In the same way that Walter held a wrong perception of Count Fosco until he saw him, the Count was guilty of the same. Once he encounters Walter's determination and his knowledge of the brotherhood, a secret society that Fosco flees from in spite of knowing that he could be killed if anyone in the society were to find out, he states, "I don't say I may not scatter your brains about the fireplace, yet. But I am a just man, even to my enemy—and I will acknowledge, beforehand, that they are cleverer brains than I thought them" (588). Count Fosco still presents his egotistical nature, but he also admits that Walter is more of a foe than he first thought. Before, Count Fosco only thought that he was a nuisance to whom he only had to communicate through Marian.

On the other hand, Walter's misconception of the Count allows him to succeed because he believes the Count has a weakness. Had he known of the Count's true villainous nature to begin with, he may not have had responded with such courage to Mr. Kyrle. While Walter does waste many pages chasing after the weaker villain, he ends up successfully restoring Laura's identity although he does not directly seek vengeance against the Count. He chooses to avenge Fosco directly for Laura's sake: "The one question to consider was, whether I was justified, or not, in possessing myself of the means of establishing Laura's identity, at the cost of allowing the

scoundrel who had robbed her of it to escape with impunity” (591). Because of his great love for Laura, he chooses to restore her identity by letting Fosco escape. If he felt the way Marian felt towards the Count’s villainy, however, he may have considered letting him go with more seriousness. Still, both of these misconceptions allow Walter to marry Laura and restore her as the rightful heir of Limmeridge.

As the main narrator of the novel, Walter presents his personality the most of any other narrator. The emphasis on his own personality supports his own presence within the narrative. Without knowing of his love for Laura at the beginning of the novel, Walter ceases to be relevant. However, Phelan brings up important questions to ask when a narrator’s interaction with the narrative goes too far:

But what happens when an author wants to use character narration for more direct communication with the audience? What happens, in other words, when the author wants to have the character narrator be an efficient and effective medium for conveying his own thoughts and beliefs without having the disclosure functions egregiously trump the narrator functions? (200)

Walter is sometimes unable to function as a trustworthy narrator because of his obvious biases. His love for Laura ultimately helps to resolve the novel and is the primary cause for the narrative’s creation. However, his misconceptions throughout the novel over his blind love for Laura and his ability to underestimate Count Fosco make him the collector of the narratives, but not the most trusted narrator.

Chapter 4: Count Fosco's Greatest Downfall and Laura's Saving Grace

Marian Halcombe, Laura's half-sister, receives more trust from the other narrators and even the audience than any other character. Wilkie Collins presents her diary entries as a credible narrative that also reveals her own thoughts and impressions. He also presents her as a woman with masculine tendencies through her ability to observe and understand her own place in the world as a woman and through her dismay at her position within the circumstances of the plot. Marian does not narrate in as much detail as Walter does, but she differs with him in one way: she actually belongs within the framework of the story. Walter's necessity in the narrative does not occur until he marries Laura. However, no one questions Marian's own involvement because she is Laura's half-sister and closest friend. On the other hand, Walter, in an effort to control the narrative, relieves Marian of her role as narrator due to her illness. While the readers of this time period adored Marian and may have preferred her role as narrator over Walter's, he still controls the narrative and other narrators' narratives, which demonstrates the gap between the readers' interpretation of the book and the characters' interpretation within the book. However, Walter writes his narrative right before the crime and right after the crime, but Marian writes her narratives during the real time of the crime. This makes her the most important narrator in the novel to convey Laura's and Count Fosco's voice.

Similar to Count Fosco, Marian also conveys a contradictory nature through her constant teetering between masculine and feminine tendencies. When Walter Hartright sees Marian for the first time, he sees her only from behind and writes, "The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude" (35). As soon as she turns around, however, Walter writes, "Never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted—never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more

strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it” (34-5). Her beautiful figure represents a feminine form, but her face resembles a man’s as she has “almost a moustache” (35) and “a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low on her forehead” (35). Throughout the novel, Marian portrays this contradiction which lends her authority rather than diluting her strong personality. Instead of being overly feminine in an abrasive manner towards men, Marian achieves a strength like a man’s while also demonstrating typically female sensitivity towards the misfortunes that occur.

Marian conveys her discomfort with her own contradictory manner throughout the novel. Though this contradiction inevitably aids her and Laura, she also acknowledges the troubles of being a woman within the novel—a move which adds to her credibility as it defies social norms of the time period. However, she does not do so simply because she is a woman, but because her gender limits her ability to aid Laura at times. For instance, before Marian falls asleep for the first time at Blackwater Park, the home of Sir Percival, she writes of her desire to go and meet with Laura since she has not seen her for months. Instead of riding out to meet them, she writes, “Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats, for life, I must respect the housekeeper’s opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way” (198). Marian is aware of her lower position as a woman, but she despises it because of her love for Laura, not because of this “condemnation.” Her awareness of a woman’s perceived weaknesses in her own society helps her to remain “composed” while still using her own strength to try as much as she can to protect those she loves. When Marian learns that Sir Percival is attempting to take Laura’s inheritance, she writes in her diary, “If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door, and have left his house, never

on any earthly consideration to enter it again. But I was only a woman—and I loved his wife so dearly! Thank God, that faithful love helped me, and I sat down again, without saying a word” (245). Marian executes her need to convey her femininity by remaining calm at the moment, knowing she could not get away with lashing out in anger. However, she sits down ultimately for Laura’s sake, not because she is only a woman. Because she strategically uses her contradictory masculine and feminine tendencies for Laura’s sake, her honor remains intact as does Wilkie Collins’ audience’s admiration for her.

Because of her intriguing contradictory nature, Marian achieved the most popularity of any of the characters of the novel apart from Count Fosco. Catherine Peters states that “a number of male readers even wrote asking for her address, so that they might propose marriage” (224) during the time of the serialization of the novel. Amy Cruse also writes of Collins’ original audience’s love for Marian: “[Edward FitzGerald] thought of having a herring-linger he was building named ‘Marion Halcombe,’ ‘after the brave girl in the story.’ Swinburne thought Marion a ‘glorious woman’” (322). Walter exclaims, “The lady is ugly!” (34) when he sees Marian for the first time, but men of the time period were still entranced by her strength and loyalty in the novel. Lonoff explains part of the reason for Marian’s popularity: “Collins gives her qualities that his period considered appropriate to men—frankness, courage, perseverance, self-control—and her comments strengthen this masculine image, for she frequently deplores her status as a woman and inveighs against feminine weaknesses” (145). Despite neglecting her femininity, men still wished to propose to her as a fictional character. While Walter falls for Laura, the audience of Wilkie’s time ultimately fell for Marian.

Furthermore, Marian’s independence and strength as a woman benefit her appeal. Sue Lonoff writes of Wilkie Collins’ leading female characters: “His heroines are forthright rather

than impudent, energetic rather than bouncing, able to function effectively without men, rather than man-hating. As such, they outshine his more traditional heroines, even when he did not intend them to triumph so decisively” (143). Marian is not as obvious in her roles as a feminine heroine as characters such as Jane Eyre are. Wilkie Collins, aware of the gender struggles of his own time in the Victorian period did not write her as a woman overcoming her bounds of femininity. Instead, Collins wrote her as a woman who overcomes her misfortunes through her intelligence and strength. Lonoff further explores Wilkie Collins’ heroines by discussing Marian: “Openly intelligent and unafraid, she laments her inferior status as a woman even as she proves her superiority by making men accept her on her terms. Nowhere in Collins’s depiction of women are the paradoxes more intriguing. While Walter is drawn to fair, pretty Laura, readers from 1859 to the present have been in more sympathy with dark, ugly Marian” (143). Her ability to accept her role as a woman and simultaneously constantly defy it through her actions captivated the hearts of Collins’ original audience because it exposed the issues of gender during the time without merely being a trite social commentary. Marian did not have to complain of her roles as a woman to show what strength a woman is capable of.

In addition to the way in which she earns credibility, the qualities that caused Collins’ audience to admire Marian also assist her in dealing with Laura’s predicament. Marian’s dependability constantly aids her and Laura throughout the novel. One example of her reliability is when she finds out Sir Percival’s scheme to take Laura’s inheritance for his own, and the letter she decides to write to Laura’s solicitor:

I sat down at once to write the letter. I began by stating our position to Mr. Kyrle exactly as it was; and then asked for his advice in return, expressed in plain, downright terms which he could comprehend without any danger of

misinterpretations and mistakes. My letter was as short as I could possibly make it, and was, I hope, unencumbered by needless apologies and needless details.

(252)

Marian writes this letter in a systematic and calculated manner, and suggests this even further by writing about it in great detail in her diary entry. She expresses her practical nature by showing that she has the capability to write a succinct letter while also having complete awareness of her own skills. She also reveals her awareness of her reliability when Laura and Marian reference a previous conversation Marian overheard between Sir Percival and his solicitor. She writes, “We must have little indeed to depend on, when the discovery that my memory can still be trusted to serve us, is hailed as if it was a discovery of a new friend” (285). Marian suggests that she is aware of the extent to which the narrative needs her. Although she is writing in her journal, the lines that Walter puts in the narrative from her diary are necessary, as they both help portray Marian as a likeable character and reveal necessary plot information from her tedious observations.

Laura Fairlie

Interestingly, Wilkie Collins thought of Marian and Laura similarly as he was writing *The Woman in White*. In his 1860 “Preface,” Collins writes of Marian and Laura: “I remember very gratefully that ‘Marian’ and ‘Laura’ made such warm friends in many quarters, that I was peremptorily cautioned a serious crisis in the story, to be careful how I treated them” (4). Most readers of his time would only choose to associate Marian, not Laura, as a “warm friend.” However, narratives such as Walter’s, Marian’s, and Eliza’s present them as inseparable companions. In the same way, Marian also treated Laura as an equal more than any other

narrator in the novel. Laura speaks the most during Marian's narratives, because Laura is not merely the victim in Marian's life; she has also been Marian's closest companion. Though Marian loves her dearly and treats her better than most of the other narrators do, she still sees the weaknesses that Laura possesses. At one point in her diary, Marian writes, "For the first time in our lives, we had changed places; the resolution was all on her side, the hesitation all on mine. I looked into the pale, quiet, resigned young face; I saw the pure, innocent heart, in the loving eyes that looked back at me—and the poor worldly cautions and objections that rose to my lips, dwindled and died away in their own emptiness" (164). Marian acknowledges Laura's "empty" eyes and the fact that she does not normally stand up for herself the way Marian does, but she is not shocked by the change. Marian still recognizes Laura's "pure, innocent heart" instead of treating Laura's uncharacteristic bravery as a monumental moment.

Furthermore, Laura speaks the most during Marian's narrative because she is not merely present for the purpose of the narrative or because of sudden love—she is Marian's half-sister. Marian provides the closest examination of Laura because she has had the most interaction with her. At one time, Laura says to Marian, "Thank God for your poverty—it has made you your own mistress, and has saved you from the lot that has fallen on *me*" (258). This example shows that Laura understands her own predicament in marrying Sir Percival. While the other narrators depict her as a helpless figure, Marian shows a side of Laura where she is aware of her fate. Marian, then, provides an insight into Laura that suggests that there is more to Laura than a person who blindly accepts her tribulations without understanding them. Furthermore, Laura suggests in this statement that Marian's poverty "saves" her from having to suffer the way Laura does, as though Marian is strong because her poverty allows her. Laura's viewpoint of their situation would differ from Lonoff's depiction of her as "[o]penly intelligent and unafraid"

(143). When Marian asks Laura what she thinks of Count Fosco, Marian writes, “[S]he will not tell me what her impression of him is, until I have seen him, and formed my own opinion first” (201). While other narrators would have formed their opinion before consulting Laura, Marian still asks for Laura’s opinion because she respects Laura more like her equal than any of the other narrators do. When Laura does have something to say, Marian puts it in her diary because she sees Laura as more than a helpless victim.

Marian also includes Laura’s opinions of her half-sister within her narrative; these prove that Laura puts her utmost trust in Marian. Laura tells Marian, “[P]romise you will never marry, and leave me. It is selfish to say so . . . —but you won’t be very fond of anybody but me, will you?” (212). Laura cannot bear the thought of living without Marian, especially after she marries Sir Percival. Laura completely depends upon Marian as a companion. When Laura must speak to Sir Percival towards the beginning of the narrative, she brings Marian with her and tells him, “My sister is here, because her presence helps me, and gives me confidence” (167). Laura has this confidence in Marian, because Marian trusts Laura’s opinion the most. While Laura’s viewpoint is constantly being ignored by others, her thoughts and opinions still matter to Marian, which is why Laura needs and depends on her so much within the novel.

One of the best ways Marian expresses her own love for and dependence on Laura is through Marian’s dealings with the fact that Laura will be marrying Sir Percival. Marian writes in her diary, “Before another month is over our heads, she will be *his* Laura instead of mine!” (185). Marian and Laura share such closeness that Marian even has this idea of possessing Laura as her companion. Her despair at losing Laura conveys how precious Laura is to Marian; this level of despair reveals an unnatural imbalance in their relationship. Because Marian is so dependable and well-liked, Marian provides Laura with more credibility because Marian feels so

strongly for Laura. Laura depends on Marian, but when Marian arrives at Blackwater Park, she devotes an entire diary entry to expressing her own dependence on Laura:

My own love! with all your wealth, and all your beauty, how friendless you are!
The one man who would give his heart's life to serve you, is far away, tossing,
this stormy night, on the awful sea. Who else is left to you? No father, no
brother—no living creature but the helpless, useless woman who writes these sad
lines, and watches by you in the morning, in sorrow that she cannot compose, in
doubt that she cannot conquer. (194)

Marian again suggests that she “owns” Laura because of Laura’s complete dependence on her. Marian does not express this dependence in a way that makes Laura seem weak, because Marian also indicates how much she needs Laura as well by saying she has a “sorrow that she cannot compose” when she thinks of how little protection that Laura has.

On the other hand, Marian presents Laura’s helpless nature in more detail after Laura comes back from seeing Sir Percival. Marian was used to dealing with Laura’s “pure, innocent heart” in the context of their happiness together. Marian further establishes this contrast from Laura before marriage by writing, “There was, in the old times, a freshness, a softness, an ever-varying and yet ever-remaining tenderness of beauty in her face, the charm of which is not possible to express in words” (211). Marian reflects on the past Laura in order to remember her as the charming person she used to be, which is why she is able to believe that Laura is not Anne Catherick once she goes to the asylum. Once Laura must deal with her ill-fated marriage to Sir Percival, Marian begins to understand the terror of Laura’s helplessness. After Laura comes back from their honeymoon, Marian notices, “This [charm] is gone . . . Whether her beauty has gained, or lost, in the last six months, the separation, either way, has made her own dear self

more precious to me than ever—and that is one good result of her marriage, at any rate!” (211). Marian’s ability to understand and separate Laura as-she-was from Laura as-she-is gives Marian an advantage over Count Fosco and his scheme to distort the identity of Laura Fairlie. Marian loves her so completely and believes her to be so “precious” so that Marian uses her qualities of intelligence and strength—qualities loved by the readers of Collins’ time—to aid Walter in restoring Laura’s identity.

Count Fosco

Since Marian is the first person to narrate about the Count, she provides the most thorough account of his actions and appearance, just as Walter does for Laura when he sees her for the first time within the timeframe of the narrative. Furthermore, after Fosco looks over Marian’s diary, he writes in it, “The presentation of my own character is masterly in the extreme” (336). His approval of her words provides them with more weight; his agreement provides more certainty to her depiction. Not only can readers trust Marian for her reliability, but afterwards, readers trust her because Fosco believes her words accurately convey his nature. Her descriptions, then, help provide the best depiction of the Count within the context of the story, especially since after he commits the crime, his involvement in the plot of the novel occurs only because of his admiration and love for Marian. Marian devotes almost an entire diary entry to describing the Count. She first describes his great ability to influence others. Marian is surprised by the way the Count “tames” his wife, who is also Laura’s aunt. Marian recalls that Eleanor Fosco was a “vain and foolish woman” (216) the last time that they saw each other, but Marian then sees her with a “look of submissive inquiry” (216) towards her husband. Marian then goes on to write, “If he had married a tigress instead of 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” (217). The readers of the time would already be aware of Marian’s own independence. When Marian explains that the Count could tame even her, this would naturally shock readers because of their knowledge of Marian’s nature already. Marian writes further of his great ability to influence: “I think the influence I am not trying to find, is in his eyes. They are the most unfathomable gray 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” (218). Marian uses the word “unfathomable” to describe Count Fosco repeatedly throughout the novel, and even Walter describes him as “unfathomable” after discussing him with Marian. Her depictions of his eyes convey his ability to even influence her. In this passage, she further implicates his growing influence on herself as she writes of how he seems to “force” her to feel things she “would rather not feel.”

Similarly, the Count also possesses a contradictory nature, which Marian describes. When Marian meets Count Fosco for the first time, she writes, “All of the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them” (219). Count Fosco puzzles Marian’s own structured nature because of how his contradictions are “original.” While Marian’s contradictions stems from her ability to possess both masculine and feminine tendencies, Fosco’s contradictions create confusion. Marian further describes these contradictions:

It seems hardly credible, while I am writing it down, but it is certainly true, that this same man, who has all the fondness of an old maid for his cockatoo, and all the small dexterities of an organ-boy in managing his white mice, can talk, when

anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe, which would make him the prominent personage of any assembly in the civilised world. (220)

Count Fosco seems to have even more fragile sensibilities than Laura does in the novel, but his own cunning and deviousness places him in a new category. Many narrators such as Walter and Eliza underestimate the Count's villainy because of this contradiction, but Marian, with her practical observations, sees that his sensibilities are odd rather than weak.

On the other hand, Marian begins to feel the Count's ability to influence even herself as she moves on with her own narrative. Marian presents her weakness by identifying her baffling understanding of his nature: "There are peculiarities in his personal appearance, his habits, and his amusements, which I should blame in the boldest terms, or ridicule in the most merciless manner, if I had seen them in another man. What is it that makes me unable to blame them, or to ridicule them, in *him*?" (217). When Marian and Laura are conversing with the Count, she writes, "His manner, and his command of our language, may also have assisted him, in some degree, to establish himself in my good opinion. He has that quiet deference, that look of pleased, attentive interest, in listening to a woman, and that secret gentleness in his voice, in speaking to a woman, which, say what we may, we can none of us resist" (218-9). Though Marian and Laura are both fearful of the Count at this point in the narrative, they cannot help enjoying their conversation because of his way with women through the characteristics that Marian mentions. Marian shows her level-headed nature throughout her diary, but she cannot maintain her level-headedness whenever the Count interferes.

While Marian conveys this weakness, she also notices the Count's own feelings towards

her. At one point Marian notices the way he speaks to her versus the way he speaks to his wife: “His method of recommending himself to *me*, is entirely different. He flatters my vanity, by talking to me as seriously and sensibly as if I was a man” (222). One of the reasons that Marian is so likeable to the public is her ability to admit her own vices such as vanity. Furthermore, she admits that she is “flattered” by his exclusive respect for her as he talks to her as “if [she] were a man.” This conversation reveals that Count Fosco is aware of Marian’s contradictions as well, since she is flattered like a woman but still speaks like a man. Marian narrates of a time later in the conversation: “I certainly never saw a man, in all my experience, whom I should be so sorry to have for an enemy. Is this because I like him, or because I am afraid of him?” (223). Marian wavers from appreciating his “strikingly original” characteristics to understanding that his ability to influence should be feared. Marian even writes that his influence is “the influence of all others that I dreaded most” (249). Because of his ability to tamper with her emotions, she dreads his presence around her and Laura and as Sir Percival’s closest companion.

Marian, aware of Sir Percival and Count Fosco’s suspicious behavior concerning Laura, bravely eavesdrops on Sir Percival and the Count who are plotting against Laura. Like many of the other characters such as Hester Pinhorn and Eliza Michelson, a significant part of Marian’s narrative details what she learns while eavesdropping. Marian, however, tempers her own bravery when she writes of her experience: “My courage was only a woman’s courage, after all; and it was very near to failing me, when I thought of trusting myself, on the ground floor, at the dead of night, within reach of Sir Percival and the Count” (319). Marian already understands the fear of her situation, but her love for Laura causes her to remain and listen. Despite her “woman’s courage,” she shows bravery by overhearing two men who would harm her for what heard of their conversation.

During her eavesdropping, Marian finds out that the Count is also afraid of her when he states, “[T]his magnificent woman, whom I admire with all my soul, though I oppose her in your interests and in mine, you drive to extremities, as if she was no sharper and no bolder than the rest of her sex. Percival! Percival! you deserve to fail, and you *have* failed” (324). Like Marian, the Count has mixed feelings towards Marian because he both admires and fears her. Another example of his fear for her occurs when he says, “I, Fosco, cunning as the devil himself, as you have told me a hundred times—I walk, in your English phrase, upon eggshells!” (324). Marian does not have to provide an explanation of his speech for him for readers to understand that he is “as cunning as the devil” and fear Marian. He understands how capable she is to cause their plan to fail, as she is doing by finding out their plan. If she did not know of the Count’s awareness of Laura and Anne’s likeness, she may have assumed that Laura was dead and that Anne was alive in the asylum instead of going to rescue her.

After Marian eavesdrops on this conversation, she becomes sick due to the cold rain and loses her ability to narrate. As Marian loses her strength after her sickness, Walter takes over with the narrative and reclaims his role as major narrator. He no longer trusts her to narrate herself, even after she gets better, and he must summarize their experiences after the Count takes Laura to the asylum for both Laura and Marian. An example of Walter’s misconception of Laura in terms of gender lies also in his perception of Marian:

Hartright’s tendency in fact is to treat Marian as a character rather than as a writer. This tendency most marked when, once his narrative succeeds hers, he writes her into the role of the self-abnegating rather than powerful, woman who illustrates the opening lines of the novel: ‘This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and of what a Man’s resolution can achieve’ (1). The

division of labor implicit in this sentence anticipates the tendency to differentiate gender roles in the resolution of the novel. (Heller 134)

One of the reasons Walter could not see her as a narrator could be because she writes in her diary, and Walter collected the important parts of her diary for the sake of the narrative. In this way, Walter gains back control of the narrative. Marian loses her strength while Walter only leaves the pages, which makes him seem as though he is the most trusted narrator, though critics and readers of the time may disagree. While Walter endears readers with his loyalty and devotion to the helpless Laura, he does not spark the same interest that Marian does since she defies the gender norms and overcomes them in the novel. Walter expresses Marian's newfound weakness: "The wasted arms told their story of the past, as she turned up her sleeves of the poor plain dress that she wore for safety's sake; but the unquenchable spirit of the woman burnt bright in her eyes even yet" (433). Though Marian does not possess the strength she once had, her "unquenchable spirit" still remains, so that she can still aid in restoring Laura's identity. Her love for Laura still assists her in helping Laura escape from the asylum. If she had not done so, then Walter may have seen Laura Fairlie's grave and done nothing. Despite her weakened state, Marian tells Walter, "Don't doubt my courage . . . it's my weakness that cries, not *me*" (433). In this instance, Marian separates her weakness from herself. Though she writes in her diary earlier of how her gender makes her weak, she recognizes this "unquenchable spirit" she possesses that overcomes both her gender role and her illness.

Despite Laura's questionable identity and stay in an asylum, Marian Halcombe surprisingly suffers the greatest change within the novel. Her change, however, is just as necessary as Laura's change to further the plot. If Marian did not suffer in such a drastic way through her illness, then the crime would have ended as soon as Marian got back to her room.

Sue Lonoff also writes of how Marian's illness benefits the readers' responses towards her: "Yet instead of disabling the character, these shifts enhance her appeal. If she were wholly bold and strong, or more decisively erotic, she would also have been more threatening, more likely to offend a Victorian public" (146). Walter, on the other hand, still sees her illness as a symbol of weakness and even "doubts her courage," which is why he leaves Marian with Laura and ultimately does not seek Marian's immediate guidance or help in this part of the novel. Marian shows that she is, indeed, not perfect once she suffers from a deadly illness. Instead, she is a dependable and truthful woman who overcomes her weaknesses, including her gender roles and sickness. However, Marian further loses control of her narrative once she comes back to her room after eavesdropping:

Collins' narrative works control the female power represented by Marian's voice, her dark sexuality (much more threatening, indeed, for being feminine than 'masculine'), and her writing. After she daringly eavesdrops on Fosco and Glyde, she falls into a 'burning fever' (327) that causes her to lose control over her text. Wandering about her room with the pen in her hand, 'incapable' of communicating with the housekeeper (327) or of writing Laura's name in her journal, Marian proves her failure as a woman writer. Writing subsequently becomes a masculine domain when Fosco takes up the pen and inscribes the woman's text in a 'man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular.' (Heller 307)

Not only does her sickness allow Walter to take over the narrative by collecting further narratives and later finishing the collection himself, but her sickness also gives the Count a chance to exploit her weakness and use this moment to write in her diary.

The Count uses his excerpt in her diary as a way to exhibit his own control over his later crime. However, the Count reveals his own weakness while writing in her diary concerning his great admiration of Marian. He writes of how “every page . . . charmed, refreshed, delighted [him]” (336). Not only does this excerpt serve to express his admiration, but the diary also may have caused his admiration for Marian to grow because of the “charming qualities” of her writing. The Count further exposes this admiration: “The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, the easy grace of style, the charming outburst of womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian” (336). The Count uses adjective upon adjective in her favor to portray the feelings that he has for Marian. And in doing so, the Count here also lists the reasons Collins’ original audience also adored her. The Count even makes sure to include this statement: “I entreat her to believe that the information which I have derived from her diary will in no respect help me to contribute to that failure” (337). He does not wish to harm Marian unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. While the Count exercises control over Marian at the moment by writing in her diary, his statement alludes to the moment when he will write his confession, which he explains that he writes for Marian’s sake.

Marian’s love for Laura and her reliability created a beloved character in the Victorian period. Marian’s own character ultimately help to further the plot by using her own strength and intelligence to help Laura, whether it is writing a well-structured letter or receiving admiration from the villain of the novel. Moreover, Marian’s great love for her half-sister allows Laura to finally restore her identity. While Walter, Laura, and Count Fosco play the roles of main

character, victim, and villain, Marian still ultimately ends the novel¹⁹ and receives the most admiration from Wilkie Collins' original audience. Rather than merely perform as a main character on her own, she also contributes through the way narrators and readers alike lovingly perceive her.

¹⁹ “Although Laura is ostensibly the mother of this child, the novel’s final triangle explicitly excludes her , constructing itself about the fraternal relationship between Walter and Marian, and what appears to be their son” (Dever 139).

Chapter 5: Silence is Gold-ish: The Distant Voices of Count Fosco and Laura Fairlie

The narrators of *The Woman in White* present the details of the plot to the readers of the novel to interpret. By the end of the narrative, however, it is hard to decide whether the characters that directly provide these narratives or the characters that necessitate the action of the plot (Laura and Count Fosco) have the loudest, most significant voices of the novel. While Count Fosco and Laura Fairlie do not dominate in terms of dialogue or narration, these two characters motivate the plot—including all the narratives of the book. Laura and the Count, in a way, silently control the narratives. Gregory Currie writes, “The picture is this: the author creates a world: a world of characters and events, and the characters do what the author decides they should do. When we think like this we don’t seek to explain why this or that is fictional, we seek to explain why this character did that, or why this fate befell that character” (57). Wilkie Collins’ “world of characters” sets up readers to ask why the Count would steal Laura’s identity and why Laura would lose her inheritance and her identity. While Collins, at times, focuses on other characters and narrators, the plot still inevitably relates back to these two characters. One of the best ways to discover the significance of their silence is to understand their exclusive importance to either the narrative (Laura Fairlie) or readers’ recognition (Count Fosco).

The answer to the question of which voice or character dominates the novel ultimately comes down to critical approach. If one were to consider only narrative theory, then Laura would easily prevail over Count Fosco because the narrators are so strongly in her favor. Narrators such as Jane Gould or Hester Pinhorn do not know Laura personally, but Walter forces them to write their narratives for her sake. During many instances, the control of the narrative is in the hands of Walter and Marian, but they, in turn, are controlled by their strong love for Laura. If they did not feel so passionately for Laura, then these narratives may never have been written. With her own

limited strength and the strength of others such as Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright, Laura overcomes her suffering. The narrative structure, therefore, ultimately focuses on Laura since it was written for her benefit.

Reading through a reader-response lens, though, gives rise to a drastically different interpretation. Despite the importance the different narratives give for the fate of Laura, readers of Wilkie Collins' time period constantly rejected her because of this narrative trend. The audience could not see the need of restoring Laura's identity. Instead, they had to hear from others why her part in the novel even mattered. Lisa Surridge says of Laura's role as a character in the novel: "Passive irresolute, dependent on her nurse, her sister, her future husband, and her guardian, Laura personifies the submissive wife promoted by conventional ideology" (161). Laura's "conventionality" in Collins' time does not aid her in terms of audience reception. She does not surprise any readers with her role as a "submissive wife" the way Marian does as an independent and level-headed woman.

Furthermore, many of the issues that Laura deals with, such as being placed in an asylum and physically losing her identity, only help Wilkie Collins further expose gender issues in that time period as she is "a clear reflection of Victorian priorities" (Lonoff 144). Since this reflection is so clear, her character does not contribute to defying social norms as Marian's does. Although Marian is typically viewed as the heroine of the novel, Lonoff writes of Laura's own role as the heroine: "Laura is the older, established kind of heroine: fair and charming, loving and beloved, virtuous but uninteresting" (143). Marian provides a refreshing new perspective of the role of heroine, which the audience of that time period adored. In contrast, Laura portrays an uninteresting version of a heroine as actions of the novel happen around or to her, but she remains passive and helpless throughout the novel.

Despite the readers' skepticism about Laura because she does not narrate her own story or directly act against those who have wronged her, Laura still prevails over Count Fosco within the narrative. Carolyn Dever provides this theory concerning readers of the novel: "[I]ndeed, the mission of the novel as a whole is to construct a plausible framework for Laura as a living person, its polemic to convince the reader, in lieu of a court of law, that she lives on, married to Walter" (110). In spite of readers' overall dislike of her character, they still need to hope for her success because of the direct focus Walter forces upon her throughout the collection of narratives. Furthermore, the readers' fondness and more direct relationship with Walter and Marian cause them to wish for Laura's happiness, since Marian and Walter will also find happiness once Laura's identity is restored. Lonoff also writes of the readers' response to the ending of the novel: "But, as even some contemporary critics were aware, the third book is anticlimactic; its purpose is to let the reader see for himself that Count Fosco and Sir Percival have been properly punished and Laura properly rewarded, and to tie up all loose ends" (101). Though readers of the time needed to see "Laura properly rewarded," this ending was still considered "anticlimactic" as this ending relates to the focus of the narrative, not their own personal attachment to her.

Though Laura triumphs over Count Fosco in the context of the actual story, Count Fosco triumphs over Laura through the audience's recognition of him. Since Count Fosco acts within the plot of the story, the audience receives his purpose, even though it was of a villainous nature. Tamar Heller writes of the possibility that Fosco is the real hero of the novel: "Because Collins himself is so taken with Fosco's energy and cynical disregard of propriety, it is easy to see this character, as U.C. Knoepflmacher does, as the novel's hidden hero, the Romantic outsider who rises above stifling social conventions" (130). As Laura's depiction of "Victorian priorities"

distances her from the appeal of readers, Count Fosco's heroism remains hidden within the narrative as the villain, but readers of the time, like Collins, would see him as a unique character defying social norms, as Marian also does in the novel.

Even though Count Fosco narrates in two parts of the novel, he narrates unaware of the purpose of his narration. He writes *to* Marian in her diary, and he writes his confession *for* Walter. When he writes his confession, he is unaware of what Walter plans to do with it, since Walter only tells him, "I demand a full confession of the conspiracy, written and signed in your presence, by yourself" (590). Fosco could only guess that Walter would presumably show it to Frederick Fairlie so that he could acknowledge Laura as his niece again and therefore claim herself as the heir to Limmeridge House. After Fosco finishes the narrative, Walter also writes, "He had not at all been troubled about writing his confession, but he was visibly perplexed and distressed about the far more important question of the disposal of his pets" (595). Since Fosco must flee from the Brotherhood, he must leave his pets behind. Once again, his peculiar tendencies override his villainy. Sue Lonoff states that "Fosco is a triumphantly successful villain precisely because he appears to be so genial and prosperous: his *bonhomie* is the shield that screens an evil all the more effective for being insidious" (64). While he should worry about the fact that he has stolen a weak woman's identity and put her into an asylum, he cares only about the fate of his pets. These contradictions make him a "successful villain," and a villain that readers can actually appreciate.

While Count Fosco is aware of an audience in his narrative, he is aware of one more out of egotism than as an understanding to the contribution he plays to the narrative as a whole. While others write with the awareness that Walter is collecting this to restore Laura's identity, Count Fosco assumes that others are reading it out of sheer interest of his genius. For instance, in

his confession, he writes, “My own mental insight informs me that three inevitable questions will be asked, here, by persons of inquiring minds” (612). He then goes on with the questions that relate to Madame Fosco’s devotion to himself, the actions he would have taken if Anne Catherick had survived, and whether he deserves to be blamed for his crime. These questions relate more to Wilkie Collins’ own need to explain these questions, understanding that others will be interested in the inner thoughts of the villainous genius. This appeal to readers relates more to Collins’ necessity for his nature to be egotistical. Fosco even adds at the end of his narrative, “I announced, on beginning it, that this narrative would be a remarkable document. It has entirely answered my expectations. Receive these fervid lines—my last legacy to this country I leave for ever. They are worthy of the occasion, and worthy of FOSCO” (613). By the end of the novel, he impressed himself more than he would impress his imaginary audience because of the way Marian and Walter have depicted him. Because of the tone Walter produces through his control of the narrative, Fosco cannot be the hero that he claims he is within the context of the narrative. Though he claims he is innocent of his crime,²⁰ the readers of the novel would not believe him. At this point, though he is well-received, readers would not trust his narrative the way he presents it. Within the narrative, Count Fosco also denies any further involvement to the plot. The crime is at the heart of the plot, but Count Fosco does not hold any further ties to the plot now that he has confessed to the crime.

Furthermore, Count Fosco does not die by the hands of Walter but by the hands of the Brotherhood, which further separates him from involvement in the novel. Lonoff writes, “In Fosco’s death, there is a loss of intellectual as well as moral and structural consistency, for he

²⁰ “With my vast resources in chemistry, I might have taken Lady Glyde’s life. At immense personal sacrifice, I followed the dictates of my own ingenuity, my own humanity, my own caution—and took her identity, instead. Judge me by what I might have done! How comparatively innocent! how indirectly virtuous I appear, in what I really did!” (612).

has committed a virtually perfect crime and thereby vindicated the theory that he expressed much earlier in the novel” (102). Lonoff is referring to the time when Count Fosco states that “the wise man’s crime is the crime that is *not* found out” (232). The Count blames his confession on his admiration and love for Marian (611), but Walter’s determination throughout the novel also creates this trap at the end of the novel for the Count. This “loss of consistency” also relates back to how his death does not relate to the story at all but to his failed attempt to escape from the Brotherhood. The secrets of Count Fosco’s past cause his demise rather than the events of the novel. While he is well-received by readers of the novel, he remains separate from the context of the narrative, especially considering that Walter collects these narratives for Laura’s sake, not Fosco’s.

At first, the distance readers experience towards the Count and Laura makes it seem as though their importance in the involvement of the narrative is secondary. Narrators of this novel invariably speak in their own voices because they are writing about their personal experiences in the plot, but the characters that are central to the novel do not necessarily need to write since other narrators speak for them. Because Count Fosco constantly attempts to separate himself from his crime, he must speak for himself through the letter he writes in Marian’s Halcombe’s diary to reveal his own feelings for her, so that his narration at the end makes sense once he admits to wronging Laura. Although the duality of the two characters makes it seem as though one has to prevail, the tension between them actually revolves around the fact that they both provide the “loudest” voices in terms of the narrative and the audience reception, despite their typical silence. Though the major narrators seemed at first to the Victorian audience to have the loudest voices, the narrators focused mainly on Count Fosco and Laura Fairlie, and so subconsciously, did the readers of that time.

Separately, Count Fosco and Laura Fairlie at first seem to possess unreliable voices, at best. Laura does not speak; instead, others speak for her. The actions of the plot happen to her, but she provides no action or practically any dialogue for herself. Count Fosco, on the other hand, relates to audiences, but the way the other narrators such as Walter and Marian perceive him presents him as an outcast in terms of the plot. He writes within the narrative completely unaware of its purpose. He does not succeed in committing the “perfect crime” because of the key narrators’ determination that he confess. When we only look at them separately, Count Fosco and Laura do not prevail; rather, the narrators control their own narratives and Count Fosco and Laura only directly or indirectly create this action.

However, when placed together, the common denominator that Count Fosco and Laura share is their strict faithfulness to the story. Their “storiness”²¹ makes their voices the most significant voices of the novel. They do not appease to the narrators and readers simultaneously, but they still receive recognition from both despite this neglect on their part. Although Count Fosco writes to Marian in his first narrative and Walter in his second, he does so with the belief that they are private and will not be acknowledged by others. The other narrators that provide necessary plot information for the novel do so with the belief, due to Walter’s express wishes, that they will be read and used against someone who has wronged Laura Fairlie.

Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco are so embedded in the story that they seem to be unaware of the narrative that they created, and this knowledge is irrelevant to the plot and narrative alike because their voices remain in the story; the readers of the novel cannot like or dislike them without the story in mind. Readers can like Walter because he is loyal to a helpless woman, and readers can appreciate Marian for her ability break from the gender norms of her society, but

²¹ By storiness I mean it is a character’s ability to remain solely and necessarily within the context of the plot of a story.

they can only be appreciated without the context of the plot or because of their common love for Laura or Count Fosco's admiration of Marian. This strict maintenance of story with both of their voices makes them completely necessary for the story in general, and this mysterious silence on both their parts provides them with the most significant combined voice of the novel.

Conclusion

Collins writes in his preface for the novel, "The only narrative which can hope to lay a strong hold on the attention of readers, is a narrative which interests them about men and women—for the perfectly obvious reason that they are men and women themselves" (7). He presents a unique opportunity in his novel by writing a detective novel with an epistolary form. The epistolary form offers readers a chance to relate to what is going on in the novel by encountering these personal thoughts and revelations of many different narrators. This novel also uniquely displays many layers of voice in both this relationship readers can have with narrators and another relationship readers may be unaware of—the relationship that forms between the characters and the plot. Count Fosco and Laura Fairlie exclusively help provide this awareness of the gap that sometimes grows between the story around which the narrative revolves and the story with which the readers consciously interact with.

Though some aspects of reader-response theory, at times, can only be understood or appreciated on a solely individual basis, this theory helps us understand the significance of the voices of characters in novels. Indeed, without acknowledgement of readership, one may accidentally choose to examine only how character drives the plot when sometimes plot—the need to create a narrative effect—may drive character, as is the case with most of our lives. The same can also be true if we only acknowledge the structure of the narrative, since the importance

of the plot is also essential, as Laura Fairlie and Count Fosco help to establish by being so relevant to the novel simply because of the impact they have in remaining fixed within the story. This novel allows us to explore not only the roles characters play within the narrative, but the deeper layer that the characters have within the context of the story. When a writer creates a novel, he builds a world within that novel where different characters have different roles that we then understand as readers through the narrative. Once we accept that at times the role of voice within the novel may be impossible to discover given that we do not live in the world of the characters, then we can grow to appreciate the gap that lies between our understanding of the characters, the one that the characters share of each other, and then finally, the one that the author has of both the characters and his intended audience.

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