Title of Paper: (Ir)Rationalizing the Female Body in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*

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Section: Articles
Date of Publication: September, 2014
Issue: 2.3

Abstract:

As a sensation novel, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* is predicated on relegating the female subject to the fringes of rationality, denying her subjectivity, and reducing her to bodily categories that are fetishized, reified, or sublimated. These reactions are triggered by middle class anxiety related to the preservation of male individuality and subjectivity, rationality and virility, as central values of the middle class value system. Sensation fiction both normalizes and hystericizes sexuality. On one hand, it is highly realistic in its depiction of domesticity; on the other, it hystericizes the domestic space by exacerbating the “feminine” impulse to secrecy and sexual desire gone awry. Displaced unto the woman, desire transforms the female subject into a paradoxical subject—highly cultured, normalized and socialized, yet also irrationalized, marginalized, and infantilized. Because of the sublimation it provides, fictional narrative becomes the ideological, propagandistic apparatus that plots, controls, and normalizes desire.

Keywords: Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, irrationality, female sexuality, gender performance, middle class anxiety, prostitution, masculinity, hysteria, disease

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When Walter meets Anne Catherick in the woods near London at midnight in one of the opening chapters of *The Woman in White*, he is taken aback by a powerful surge of sexual desire. He is also piqued by his inability to relegate her to a precise position in any definite category of class, physical and mental health, sexual integrity and family/social status. The passage describing their midnight encounter rests on a constant shift and tension regarding Anne’s position in Walter’s narrative. In the process of representing the chance meeting, he unravels the ambiguity and assigns Anne to various marginal roles in light of the categories described above: thus, she is lower middle class, weak and unbalanced in terms of physical and mental health, disoriented, a potential prostitute, and a possible social outcast. Throughout the novel, Walter’s narrative will conveniently reinforce these categories in order to cement Walter’s centrality. The relegation to conventional, conformist, and marginal positions of the women in the novel turns them into appendices of Walter’s middle class white male status. A key factor upon which this relegation depends is the supposed rationality of the male vs. the irrationality of the female. A variety of theories of rationalizing sexual desire competed for attention and resulted in severe repercussions for Victorian female sexuality. As a sensation novel, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* is predicated on relegating the female subject to the fringes of rationality, denying her subjectivity, and reducing her to bodily categories that are fetishized, reified, or sublimated. These reactions are triggered by middle class anxiety related to the preservation of male individuality and subjectivity, rationality and virility, as central values of the middle class value system.
Anne’s lack of agency in Walter’s text is obvious in the way she is denied the possibility to shape Walter’s narrative. Plot-wise, Anne functions as the force Walter, as a middle class male, seeks to counter. Percival and Fosco are indeed Walter’s foils, but they are his equals as well, part of a network of homosociality and brotherhood. If they threaten Walter in any way, they threaten him peripherally (he may be prevented from marrying Laura or inheriting Limmeridge, but even so, he will remain the epitome of the middle class hero). Anne (and by extension Laura and Marian) can be subversive in a much more insidious way to Walter’s centrality, and Walter’s attempt to subjugate her seems to be his central plight in the narrative. In fact, this effort subsumes all others: whether Walter manages to subjugate the female life force is going to determine whether he will come out triumphant from his encounter with the villains, gain the inheritance, and Laura’s hand. Thus, Walter’s encounter with Anne in the woods is a prefiguration of the tension between the sexes which is going to dominate the novel, grounded first and foremost in the contention for the right to the expression of sexual desire, the development of individuality, and the claim to rationality.

The fact that Walter meets runaway Anne in the woods at midnight immediately relegates Anne to the realm of a sensual and psychological underworld, especially as sexual and mental instability clues begin to accrue in Walter’s narrative. It is important to note that Walter is in charge of representing Anne to an explicit, not just an implicit, reader of his text, and thus we have to assume that Walter is subject to authorial slippage of intention and play of signifiers. His observing gaze places Anne in the position of the observed, and, as Walter’s sexual stir becomes more and
more obvious, it also objectifies Anne sexually. The scenery is suggestive for the way in which we are to contextualize these two characters: Anne is framed by a feminine, lunar setting (it is a “close and sultry night,” at “nearly midnight,” the “moon. . . full and broad in the dark blue starless sky, and the broken ground of the heath . . . wild enough in the mysterious light to be hundreds of miles away from the great city that lay beneath it” [Collins 22]), while Walter resists feminization by opposing the feminine landscape. He finds himself in a “restless frame of mind and body” (Collins 23), but he keeps this agitation at bay, as if protecting himself against the idea of descent into the “heat and gloom” (Collins 22) of strong sensations. It is not Anne who is sexually charged in this scene, but Walter, and yet Anne is burdened with the charge of open sexuality (and threatening “porousness,” to borrow one of Nancy Armstrong’s terms).

Anne is introduced as Every Woman in the male sexual fantasy: a nameless, hieratic creature in white springing out of the ethereal dark, sultry night (or, as Walter puts it, “sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven” [Collins 24]); a prostitute dressed as an ingénue, “from head to foot in white garments” (Collins 24), who initiates physical contact, startling the male out of his reverie. Throughout the novel Anne fills the place of paradox, and in this particular case she functions as the trope of Walter’s contradictory position. From the very beginning his romantic entanglement with her is untenable because she has been promised to Percival. And yet, because of Laura’s ambiguous and shifting identity, Ann will move from the role of fantasy-lover to that of fiancée, only to be thrown once more into the realm of fiction when her identity is questioned; and then, of course, she becomes the prosaic
wife, not accidentally, perhaps, around the same time Anne’s secret is disclosed and Walter finally consigns her to the definitive position of dead woman with no secret.

Even though we soon learn that, in line with true gentlemanliness we (along with Walter) are not supposed to make untoward assumptions about a woman discovered alone in the dead of night, Anne’s physical description strengthens rather than contradicts that inappropriate assumption: “a colourless, youthful face, meager and sharp to look at about the cheeks and chin; large, grave, wistfully attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips; and light hair of a pale, brownish-yellow hue” (Collins 24). The only way we could misconstrue Anne as a prostitute, Walter instructs his intended audience, is if we ourselves were members of “the grossest of mankind” (Collins 24)—an indulgence which Walter cannot entertain for long, if only because that is the privilege of decadent aristocracy. Anne is being pursued by other males, and their own fantasy-related entanglements make her an even more attractive sexual figure. Walter responds not out of wisdom, as he well admits, but out of a chivalric impulse toward the maiden in distress. Even more plainly now, he emphasizes his sexual arousal: “As she repeated the words for the third time, she came close to me and laid her hand, with a sudden gentle stealthiness, on my bosom—a thin hand; a cold hand (when I removed it with mine) even on that sultry night. Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman's” (Collins 26). The final scene of this encounter could be easily read as Walter’s flustered arousal at the end of a highly charged encounter which breaks the patterns of conventionality and transports both Walter and Anne into the realm of illicit sexuality, but also as Walter’s need to reify Anne by hyper-sexualizing her. Sexuality is the primary mode
of sublimation in the battle for dominance and centrality between the male and the female at the heart of sensation fiction.

Walter’s state of mind is already dominated by a fantasy that relies on an exchange of power: the goal of his trip to Limmeridge is to “superintend” two ladies’ art practice, while he himself relates to them only as a subordinate, a hired tutor—a position he will eventually unbalance, gaining complete domination over the ladies, Limmeridge House, and the other male rivals. His virility is used as a tool against Percival (and Mr. Fairlie), whose domains he will divide and conquer. His sexual fuel, however, is ensured by the women he marginalizes, dominates, and appropriates. When Anne touches him, he experiences a strong physical shock (“every drop of blood in [his] body . . . brought to a stop by the touch of [the] hand” [Collins 23]) because, for a moment, fantasy and reality collapse in one. Anne’s touch concentrates not just Walter’s sexual tension but his social apprehensions related to the imminent encounter with the upper class ladies at Limmeridge. Walter’s reaction is revealing. His fingers “tightening round the handle of [his] stick” (Collins 23) initiate the frequent motif of the “private rod” as the tool of mastering sexual impulses and the women that stir them. (Both Percival and Fosco make use of the rod in different ways with their wives.)

Sensation novels begin, for the first time, to acknowledge the female reality in a new historical context as they revolve around “strong and active female figures” or, as in Collins’ novels, around a “burgeoning awareness of the unfixed nature of gender” (Hall 154). Donald Hall rationalizes female behavior in the social arena of the time. Women are no longer prone to romancing during “moonlight rambles, or
meditations after dark at an open window . . . They are strong, sensible, and matter of fact” (152). He traces the causes of the deromanticization of women to the beginning of industrialism when women began to labor like men, while they were still artificially portrayed as weak and decorative. Indirectly, Hall’s assertion that Collins “[dramatizes] transgressive forms of female agency that challenge the traditional ‘language’ and ‘ideas’ used to understand, evaluate, and categorize such activity” (154) presupposes a rationalization of this new type of femalehood which Collins calls “female industrialization” (quoted in Hall 154). If the new woman presupposes the development of a more rational individual, she poses a threat to the rationality of the male. The issue of rationality is closely connected to women’s incipient ability to manipulate language. (In Walter’s narrative, Marian is one of the few women allowed a voice.) Hall notes that female agency increases with the rise of articulate women whose authoritative voices enter in dissonance with the patriarchally encoded language which continues to describe them (156).

This sudden gain in female agency seems to sit at odds with Walter’s portrayal of Anne, and later of Laura and Marian, but sensation fiction overturns the expected categories. The female is both subdued and insidious, subsumed to her traditional role and defiant, sometimes openly, and more often insidiously so. Ann Gaylin identifies the female as a figure of transgression whose illicit habit of eavesdropping is indicative of an anxiety of gender, identity, and social agency, considering that women’s secluded lives limited their outside opportunities, but enabled them to manipulate the secrets of private life, to withhold or disseminate them, to make or unmake one’s social identity. The text of The Woman in White itself becomes the
product of eavesdropping, but also the stage for gender struggle in controlling the narrative. Even though eavesdropping is a female habitual occupation, Walter, the patriarchal figure holds the reins of the narrative and determines who gets to tell what. Thus, eavesdropping links the distinction between private and public spheres to Victorian middle-class assumptions about gender, sexual and social identity. Even when the female is completely subjected to the male’s ambitions, the male-female relationship is problematized socially, and in Marlene Tromp’s study—also legally—eventually justifying the female’s right not to be victimized.

Marlene Tromp frames the relationship between Laura and Percival in terms of legality and class. Both determine Percival’s identity as he tries to fashion himself into an aristocrat by forging his birth legitimacy and extorting Laura’s inheritance money. Tromp argues that Percival’s identity shifts between the status of the aristocrat (as his intended projection) and that of the “cruel working-class husband of the Divorce Act” (75)—a position against which he tries to defend himself, but in which he finds himself trapped, as he degenerates into brutality rather than rakish indulgence (the “degraded” backsliding position of decadent aristocracy [Trump 75]). Percival’s identity slippage is precipitated by tensions related to the secret of his birth, and his violence toward Laura is a mark of his fraudulent identity (78).

The constant shift in positions of authority, class status, and power indicates a tension at the core of sensation fiction. John Kucich argues that the tension is due to the forces of transgression and deviance. In Collins’s novels, these forces “anchor the symbolic repertoire of Victorian self-representation” (Kucich 76). Kucich presents Collins as an “outsider” vis-à-vis “legitimate” definitions of social identity—a
reformer whose assaults on social injustice border on “scandalizing middle-class sensibility” (79). Kucich’s goal is to position Collins on the outsider/insider dichotomy in such a way as to outline the clash between the bourgeois and the antibourgeois energies embedded in Victorian writing. Collins transgresses symbolic boundaries in his fiction and makes transgression into an antibourgeois symbol (81).

In the same vein, Pamela Perkins is suspicious of Walter’s manipulating the narrative in order to increase his dominance and repression of Marian Halcombe, although, through a nice twist on Collins’s part, Walter’s authority is subverted and turned into a subtle critique of Victorian society. Walter’s truth is not the objective Truth, and Walter’s aim is not to re-establish Laura’s identity, but to defend a certain type of social order which will eventually make him the possessor of Laura and Limmeridge House.

Sensation fiction portrays Victorian women as child-like, incapable of self-government, and in need of regimented normalization. A whole arsenal is mobilized toward the reinforcement of a certain type of gender performance. In mastering the female, the male is controlling that side of himself that threatens to pull toward the irrational, primitive, and instinctual. In The Woman in White Laura is clearly treated like a child, and she is let into none of the abundant secrets that structure the plot out of consideration for her innocence, poor health, and lack of insight and comprehension—all indications that she is perceived as a creature endowed with less analytical prowess, less self-composure and rationality than her male governors. Marian, who is clearly endowed with all these traits, is made to look reprehensible as a feminine sexual object and, in fact, is not sexually objectified because of her “male”
rational mind. In his turn, Percival seems to suffer from a degree of objectification and effeminacy as presented through Fosco’s snide remarks. Presumably, he is not endowed with the same cold rationality as the count and makes impulsive decisions motivated by instinct and anger. His bastard status supplies an explanation for the lack of composure that should otherwise be naturally inherent to his gender and social class.

In *How Novels Think* Nancy Armstrong uses the categories of reproduction and repetition to define the good Victorian male subject. The concept of reproduction posits the individuals’ progress in terms of desire—how to become conscious, enact, and find ways to express desire in socially acceptable terms by developing a coherent, unified narrative of the self. The overarching theme unifying the story is progress—a story about “the march of civilization” in which individual desire and societal norms come together as an entity. The narrative becomes an analogy of the *buildungs*, since the telling of the story involves the act of mediation between disclosing and concealing desire, expressing and containing it within the narrative, and capturing the tension in the writer’s own development. Any narrative is a *buildungsroman* of individuality and civilization; it is a fiction that reproduces the past of the self and the self as a social body—a way to “think with the logic of reproduction on a collective scale” (109).

In this logic, *The Woman in White* is a reproductive tale. Multiple characters tell different stories, but ultimately Walter, who controls the final shape of the narrative, tells his version of the story of male and female desire. While the male
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search is motivated by adding to what he already has—(Walter already holds a fairly respectable status, and while Fosco and Percival’s conditions are forged, they could very well continue to live respectable lives within the forged situation they have created for themselves)—the female search is motivated by regaining what has been taken away from them by males in the first place. Thus, in an antithesis of progress, when and if they regain their losses, they are no further off than when they had first started. (Anne’s quest throughout the novel is for a safe haven away from the asylum and her pursuer, Laura’s quest is for her original identity, and Marian’s for her original place near Laura.) Consequently, Walter’s narrative focuses on the enactment of male desire through stripping the female of her identity and then generously returning it in fractions, once he has acquired his goals. Anne is most conspicuously blighted with a mental deficiency of sorts. Laura, her double, is a helpless woman-child, and only Marian, the adult-woman, learns to master the mediation. Marian is the only one who reproduces herself by telling a story, even though both Laura and Anne are the story, while Marian is the woman without a secret.

Diane Elam places the “woman in white” at the intersection of womanhood with referentiality and the question of truth—all these categories beset by the problematic void represented by whiteness. The problem is whether “it is possible to represent truthfully or to know the truth about representation” (50), thus engaging in a rationalization of identity, origin, and sexual ontology. Victorian idealization of womanhood implies the denial of sexuality, body, and thus identity. If the woman is reduced to blankness once she fulfills her role in representing the male point of view, this very blankness becomes problematic as an absence, as a void that seeks to be

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filled with meaning—the secret that needs to be unveiled. In this context, it is interesting to point out that sensation fiction has the merit of operating on a contradictory and paradoxical level: no sooner is the void opened that it is immediately filled up. The female figure that functions as a mere excuse for the reinforcement of masculinity is doubled and tripled by self-representation, defying simplification.

Sensation fiction both normalizes and hystericizes sexuality. On one hand, it is highly realistic in its depiction of domesticity; on the other, it hystericizes the domestic space by exacerbating the “feminine” impulse to secrecy and sexual desire gone awry. Displaced unto the woman, desire transforms the female subject into a paradoxical subject—highly cultured, normalized and socialized, yet also irrationalized, marginalized, and infantilized. Because of the sublimation it provides, fictional narrative becomes the ideological, propagandistic apparatus that plots, controls, and normalizes desire. Laura and Walter not only survive the narrative but prosper within it, as prototypes of self-governed individuals, indistinct, non-individuals (the proper twins to their improper counterparts). Anne and Percival are outside legality and civil society, anomalous, and thus dispensable. The obsession with purity finds its most paradoxical expression in literary representations of the female body—the locus of purity and frigidity, through the absence and neutralization of desire, in an effort to prevent slippage into the primitive. The woman as the guardian of the sexual purity of the species becomes also the guardian of the cultural domestication of instinct; but she is also the ground on which impure drives fight against the society’s attempt to stave them off and normalize them.
That literature and the body are closely connected in a symbiotic relationship is the focus of Pamela Gilbert’s *Desire, Disease and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels*. Gilbert introduces the body as “the fundamental trope of human experience,” sensationalized and “ineradically entwined in subjectivity” (15). Appropriating the trope of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque body, which challenges the ideologies of order and reason and constitutes a form of resistance to the abstract, idealized angel in the house, Gilbert describes the female as infected by disease. The perceived impurity is due both to inner disease and outer infection. Both Laura and Marian become ill at one point, but it may be significant to note that Marian’s diseased body is relocated to the middle of the house in a hidden room, while Laura’s is not necessarily exposed, but her disease is made into a spectacle of descriptive detail (observed even when her body is substituted by Anne’s). Also significant is the fact that Anne’s body is also the potential prostitute’s body, and even though she dies of a heart attack and not a venereal disease, her body is made into a spectacle of contradictions under Walter’s gaze.

Gilbert also introduces the idea of the Victorian popular text as an infected body, and also a body of text that infects its readership through its dubious spicy tastes and intoxication. The text of *The Woman in White* could be seen as a bulk body doubled with questionable content to make it gain in weight and size. Walter’s narrative gains in bulk through the addition of the female narrative, which he quantifies, measures, increases, or decreases. Thus, the female narrative is far more sensationalized than the portions allocated to the male voices (those of Fosco, Walter, the doctor, the lawyer and Mr. Fairlie).
Subjected to the ideologies which construct it, the female body does not stabilize ideology and narrative because “[r]eaders’ bodies infected by their intake of narrative, become narrative themselves. Instead of the body stabilizing ideology and narrative, ideology and narrative destabilize the body” (Gilbert 67). Fosco takes hold of Marian’s diary while she is sick, while her body is destabilized by illness, and in turn destabilizes the body of her text. Through a textual transference of sorts, he supplants Marian’s body with the text of her diary, thus violating both. The female body is particularly susceptible to penetration and adulteration. Pamela Gilbert claims that “[t]he bodies of women, being more permeable, more mutable, more textual than those of men, depended more on context for their meaning, and were vulnerable to rereadings—or rewritings—through experience which could change them essentially” (68). One such text, open to rereading and rewriting is Laura’s life, constantly under revision. The revisionary move is repeated in Marian’s case (her input in the narrative is edited) and in Anne’s case (her story is told from several points of view), a treatment not applied to any of the male voices in the novel. The fact that the woman is read as a text can be ennobling, Gilbert notes, but she is also read and consumed as an intoxication, added bulk, or infection. Walter’s revision of these narratives enforces his position as author in charge of protecting his text against the forces of slippage and shifting of meaning.

In the context in which the sensation novel was believed, as Gilbert claims, to appeal to the ‘lower’ tastes and to feed the “lower mouths” (78), Laura is protected from the secret(s) as from the digested bulk of sensation fiction, which would suppose ingesting a narrative of bastardy, madness, and illicit love. Impermeable to such
inappropriate narratives, Laura is thus the prototype of the middle class woman—a
child infantilized by the “adults” who protect her against the consumption of impure,
adulterated foods—paradoxically, the very text that makes her. A blank at the center
of her own story, Laura is (in) the text, but also outside of it; both the blank which
structures the narrative, and the narrative itself.
Works Cited


