VINTAGE

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

WILKIE COLLINS

Contents

About the Book

Marian and her sister Laura live a quiet life under their uncle’s guardianship until Laura’s marriage to Sir Percival Glyde. Sir Percival is a man of many secrets – is one of them connected to the strange appearances of a young woman dressed all in white? And what does his charismatic friend, Count Fosco, with his pet white mice running in and out of his brightly coloured waistcoat, have to do with it all? Marian and the girls’ drawing master, Walter, have to turn detective in order to work out what is going on, and to protect Laura from a fatal plot . . .

About the Author

Still unsurpassed as a masterpiece of narrative drive and excruciating suspense, *The Woman in White* is also famous for introducing, in the figure of Count Fosco, the prototype of the suave, sophisticated evil genius. The first detective novel ever written, it has remained, since its publication in 1860, the most admired example of the genre.

CHRONOLOGY

DATE	AUTHOR'S LIFE	LITERARY CONTEXT
1824	Born at 11 New Cavendish Street, Marylebone, 9 January.	Walter Scott: *Redgauntlet*.
1829	Family moves to Hampstead.	
1828		
1829		
1830	Family moves to Bayswater.	Cobbett: *Rural Rides*.
1831		Peacock: *Crotchet Castle*.
1832		Tennyson: *Poems*.
1833		Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus*.
1834		Ainsworth: *Rookwood*.
1835	Pupil at Maida Hill Academy to 1836.	
1836	From September for two years, family tour of France and Italy.	Dickens: *Sketches by Boz* and *Pickwick Papers*.
1837		Carlyle: *The French Revolution*. Dickens: *Oliver Twist*.
1838	Family move to 20 Avenue Road, Regent's Park. Pupil at Mr Cole's private boarding school in Highbury.	Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby*.
1839		Darwin: *Voyage of the*

		Beagle. Carlyle: *Chartism*.
1841	Apprenticed to Antrobus & Co., tea merchants, in the Strand.	Carlyle: *Heroes and Hero-Worship*.
1843	First publication (August), ‘The Last Stage Coachman’, in *The Illuminated Magazine*.	Carlyle: *Past and Present*. Dickens: *Martin Chuzzlewit*.
1845		Disraeli: *Sybil*.
1846	Law student (May) at Lincoln’s Inn.	Edward Lear: *Book of Nonsense*.
1847		C. Brontë: *Jane Eyre*. E. Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*. Thackeray: *Vanity Fair*.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

Repeal of Combination Acts.

Wellington becomes Prime Minister. Corn Law (sliding scale).
Peel’s police force in London. Catholic Emancipation.
Fall of Wellington government. Grey becomes Prime Minister.
July
Revolution in Paris. Manchester and Liverpool railway.
Burning of Bristol in Reform demonstrations.
Faraday’s electromagnetic current.
Reform Act.
Factory Act. Abolition of slavery. Keble’s Assize Sermon.
New Poor Law. Houses of Parliament burnt. Melbourne becomes Prime Minister.
Whigs dismissed; Peel becomes Prime Minister.
Fox Talbot’s first photograph. Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Whigs return; Melbourne becomes Prime Minister. Municipal Reform Act.

Accession of Queen Victoria.

London and Birmingham railway. People's Charter.

Anti-Corn-Law League. Bedchamber Plot. Penny Postage Act. Chartist National Convention.
Fall of Whig government. Peel becomes Prime Minister.

Rebecca riots.

Railway mania. Potato failure in Ireland.
Potato famine. Repeal of Corn Laws. Russell becomes Prime Minister.
Daily News.
Chloroform first used.
Franklin expedition.

DATE	AUTHOR'S LIFE	LITERARY CONTEXT
1848	First published book (November), *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, R. A.*	Dickens: *Dombey and Son*. Mrs Gaskell: *Mary Barton*.
1849	Exhibits painting at Royal Academy summer exhibition.	Dickens: *David Copperfield*. Clough: *Amours de Voyage*.
1850	First published novel (February), *Antonina*.	Tennyson: *In Memoriam*. Clough: *Dipsychus*.
1851	Meets Dickens for first time (March); and (May) acts with Dickens in Bulwer Lytton's *Not So Bad As We Seem*.	Ruskin: *The Stones of Venice*. Mrs Gaskell: *Cranford*.

1852	First contribution to *Household Words*. Tours provinces with Dickens' theatrical company. *Basil* published (November).	Dickens: *Bleak House*. Thackeray: *Henry Esmond*.
1853	Tours Switzerland and Italy with Dickens and Augustus Egg.	Charlotte Brontë *Villette*. Charlotte Yonge: *The Heir of Redclyffe*.
1854	*Hide and Seek* (June) published.	Dickens: *Hard Times*.
1855	Has first play, *The Lighthouse*, performed.	Trollope: *The Warden*. Mrs Gaskell: *North and South*.
1856	In Paris (March-April) with Dickens. Joins staff of *Household Words. After Dark* (short stories) published. Charles Reade: *It is Never Too Late to Mend*.	De Quincey: *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.
1857	*The Dead Secret* (June) published. Tours Cumberland, Lancashire and Yorkshire with Dickens.	Dickens: *Little Dorrit*. Trollope: *Barchester Towers*. George Eliot: *Scenes of Clerical Life*.
1858		
1859	From January, living for the rest of his life (with one interlude) with Mrs Caroline Graves. *The Queen of Hearts* (short stories) published.	Darwin: *The Origin of Species*. George Eliot: *Adam Bede*. Smiles: *Self-Help*. Meredith: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*.
1860	*The Woman in White*	Dickens: *Great*

	published (15 August) in volume form.	*Expectations*. George Eliot: *The Mill on the Floss*. Ruskin: *Unto This Last*.
1861	Resigns from *All the Year Round*.	George Eliot: *Silas Marner*. Charles Reade: *The Cloister and the Hearth*.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

European revolutions.

Don Pacifico. Gold in California.

Great Exhibition.
Dismissal of Palmerston.
French *coup d'état*.
Livingstone reaches Zambesi.
Derby becomes Prime Minister: Disraeli becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer. Aberdeen becomes Prime Minister; Gladstone becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer. New Houses of Parliament opened.

Crimean War (to 1856). Crystal Palace at Sydenham.
Palmerston becomes Prime Minister. Fall of Sebastopol. *Daily Telegraph*.

Peace of Paris. Speke on Victoria Nyanza.

Defeat and return of Palmerston. Indian Mutiny. Divorce Act.

Defeat of Palmerston. Derby becomes Prime Minister. India transferred to Crown. Jews admitted to Parliament. Property qualification for MPs removed. Livingstone on Lake Nyassa.

Cobden treaty with France. Volunteer movement. Garibaldi in Sicily and Naples.

Victor Emmanuel King of Italy. American Civil War (to 1865).

DATE	AUTHOR'S LIFE	LITERARY CONTEXT
1862	*No Name* published.	Braddon: *Lady Audley's Secret*.
1863	*My Miscellanies* (selection of journalism) published.	George Eliot: *Romola*.
1864		Mrs Gaskell: *Sylvia's Lovers*.
1865		Newman: *Apologia*. Dickens: *Our Mutual Friend*. Lewis Carroll: *Alice in Wonderland*.
1866	*Armadale* published.	Mrs Gaskell: *Wives and Daughters*. George Eliot: *Felix Holt*. Kingsley: *Hereward the Wake*.
1867		Trollope: *The Last Chronicle of Barset*.
1868	*The Moonstone* published (4 October). Caroline Graves marries Joseph Charles Clow; Collins forms liaison with Martha Rudd ('Mrs Dawson').	
1869	Daughter, Marian Dawson (4 July), by Martha Rudd.	Arnold: *Culture and Anarchy*. J. S. Mill: *The Subjection of Women*.
1870	*Man and Wife* published.	Dickens: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

		(incomplete).
1871	Second daughter by Martha Rudd. Caroline Graves again living with Collins (May).	Darwin: *Descent of Man*. Lewis Carroll: *Through The Looking-glass*.
1872	*Poor Miss Finch* published.	George Eliot: *Middlemarch*. Samuel Butler: *Erewhon*.
1873	*The New Magdalen* published. Brother dies. From September (to March 1874), tours United States and Canada.	J. S. Mill: *Autobiography*. Arnold: *Literature and Dogma*.
1874	Son by Martha Rudd.	Hardy: *Far from the Madding Crowd*.
1875	*The Law and the Lady* published.	
1876	*The Two Destinies* published.	George Eliot: *Daniel Deronda*.
1877		Harriet Martineau: *Autobiography*. Mallock: *The New Republic*.
1878		Hardy: *The Return of the Native*.
1879	*A Rogue's Life* and *The Fallen Leaves* published.	Meredith: *The Egoist*.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

Lancashire cotton famine (to 1864).

Fenian conspiracy. Insurrection in Jamaica. Russell becomes Prime Minister.

Hyde Park riots. Derby becomes Prime Minister; Disraeli becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Reform Act. Disraeli becomes Prime Minister. Trial of Fenians at Manchester. Marx: *Das Kapital*, vol. I.
Gladstone becomes Prime Minister. Prosecution of Governor Eyre of Jamaica.

Girton College, Cambridge, for women students.

Franco-Prussian War. Civil Service open to competition. Education Act (compulsory attendance to thirteen). Dickens dies.
Paris Commune. Abolition of purchase of army commissions. Tichbourne Case.

Remington typewriter.

Disraeli becomes Prime Minister.

Bulgarian atrocities.
Victoria becomes Empress of India. *Daily Chronicle*. Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* acted.

Congress of Berlin. Afghan War. Microphone invented.

Zulu War.

DATE	AUTHOR'S LIFE	LITERARY CONTEXT
1880	*Jezebel's Daughter* published.	Gissing: *Workers in the Dawn*. Hardy: *The Trumpet Major*.
1881	*The Black Robe* published.	Henry James: *Portrait*

		of a Lady Wilde: *Poems* W. H. White: *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*.
1883	*Heart and Science* published.	Trollope: *Autobiography*. Stevenson: *Treasure Island*.
1884	'*I Say No*' published.	
1885		Ruskin: *Praeterita*. Meredith: *Diana of the Crossways*. Walter Pater: *Marius the Epicurean*.
1886	*The Evil Genius* published.	Hardy: *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Stevenson: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.
1887	*Little Novels* (short stories) published.	Conan Doyle: *A Study in Scarlet*.
1888	*The Legacy of Cain* published.	Kipling: *Plain Tales from the Hills*. Mrs Humphrey Ward: *Robert Elsmere*.
1889	Dies at 82 Wimpole Street (23 September); buried (27 September) at Kensal Green Cemetery.	Jerome K. Jerome: *Three Men in a Boat*. Conan Doyle: *The Sign of Four*. Gissing: *The Nether World*.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

Gladstone becomes Prime Minister. Bradlaugh’s Claim to Affirm. *Tit-Bits*.

Married Women’s Property Act. Majuba Hill.

Fabian Society. Maxim gun.

Extension of the franchise.
Fall of Khartoum. Salisbury becomes Prime Minister.

Gladstone becomes Prime Minister. Home Rule Bill. Liberal split. Salisbury becomes Prime Minister.

Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. Trafalgar Square riots. Independent Labour Party.

Dock strike. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* acted.

The Woman in White

Wilkie Collins

with an Introduction by
Nicholas Rance

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION

The Woman in White was serialized in *All the Year Round*, the weekly periodical edited by Wilkie Collins' friend, occasional collaborator and competitor as a best-selling novelist, Charles Dickens, from November 1859 to August 1860. In August, it was published as a book in the standard Victorian format of three volumes, by Sampson Low in England and Harper Brothers in the United States. In England, *The Woman in White* heralded a decade of literary sensationalism, in which what by the early 1860s reviewers were already labelling the 'sensation novel', a term borrowing from the 'sensation drama' of the contemporary stage, dominated the market for fiction.

Wilkie Collins notoriously led his private life on advanced principles. That life has been fully explored for the first time in a recent biography, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, by William M. Clarke, who has had the advantage as a biographer of being married to the novelist's great-grand-daughter. Collins was Charles Dickens' prized 'vicious associate' in nights of 'amiable dissipation and unbounded license', functioning, as Clarke suggests, as a necessary emotional safety-valve for Dickens at the time of the beginning of his acquaintance with the eighteen-year-old actress, Ellen Ternan, and of his acute distress over his marriage. The two novelists (Dickens, born in 1812, was twelve years the senior) had met in 1851 when Wilkie Collins was summoned as a last-minute substitute to play the modest part of valet to Dickens' protagonist in one of the latter's lavish amateur theatrical productions. To Collins, unlike the young Dickens, it was a matter of principle not to

marry. In the mid-1850s, however, his more strictly bachelor days ended when Caroline Graves entered his life in sensational circumstances which inspired the scene in *The Woman in White* of Walter Hartright's meeting Anne Catherick. Of the original incident, there is an often quoted account by John Millais in his biography of his father, Sir John Millais, the celebrated painter and Collins' friend and contemporary.

One night in the fifties Millais was returning home to Gower Street from one of the many parties held under Mrs Collins's hospitable roof in Hanover Terrace, and, in accordance with the usual practice of the two brothers, Wilkie and Charles, they accompanied him on his homeward walk through the dimly-lit, and in those days semi-rural, roads and lanes of North London. It was a beautiful moonlit night in the summer time, and as the three friends walked along chatting gaily together, they were suddenly arrested by a piercing scream coming from the garden of a villa close at hand. It was evidently the cry of a woman in distress; and while pausing to consider what they should do, the iron gate leading to the garden was dashed open, and from it came the figure of a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight. She seemed to float rather than to run in their direction, and, on coming up to the three young men, she paused for a moment in an attitude of supplication and terror. Then, seeming to recollect herself, she suddenly moved on and vanished in the shadows cast upon the road.

While Millais was reflecting on the beauty of the woman, Collins pursued her. Dickens' daughter, Kate Perugini, whose first husband had been Wilkie's brother, Charles, related in the 1930s how Wilkie Collins 'had a mistress called Caroline, a young woman of gentle birth, and the origin of the woman in white'. William Clarke, who exposes the gentle birth as a myth, suggests the relationship to have been

companionable and equal, remarkably so for the time: without the option of being a pallid angel in the house, Caroline was witty, charming and competent. Collins was not to be moved on the question of marriage, however, and in 1868, with her bluff seemingly having been called in trying to shift him from his position, Caroline married someone else, Joseph Charles Clow, whose family was in the wine trade. Seldom lacking in *sang froid*, Wilkie Collins attended the wedding. The marriage was a brief one and Caroline was soon back with Wilkie Collins, though probably on altered terms, as Clarke thinks. Collins had by now installed in conveniently neighbouring lodgings Martha Rudd, a girl from a poor Norfolk family whom he had met probably in 1864, when she was nineteen, and by the time of Caroline's return she was expecting her second child by Wilkie.

Wilkie Collins' bohemianism extended to the consumption of drugs as well as to his romantic and sexual arrangements. Thus Collins is in the tradition of the nineteenth century's distinguished literary opium addicts, dosing himself with laudanum (opium distilled in alcohol) originally to relieve the pain of his gout, but progressing until anecdotes abounded in relation to his habit: a servant was alleged to have swallowed Wilkie's nightly dose of laudanum, apparently mistaking it for port, and to have dropped dead on the spot, and Collins had a recurrent hallucination of a woman with a green face and teeth like tusks, who waited on the stairs for him as he went to bed and bade him good-night by biting his shoulder. Such traumas apart, one may agree with William Clarke's remark about the bohemian proclivities of Collins that 'he did these things not to make a point, not to be ahead of his time, but simply because he was always at ease with his own decisions'. As Clarke's biography reveals, Collins was a devoted and anxious parent albeit shunning marriage. The two significant women in his life, Caroline Graves and

Martha Rudd, knew about each other, and the children of Martha Rudd and Collins shared holidays with the children of Caroline's daughter, Harriet, whom Collins treated as paternally as if he had indeed been her father. Collins did not prefer his principles to the well-being and comfort of the women, and was always respectably Mr Dawson when he visited Martha Rudd as Mrs Dawson.

The first published work of Wilkie Collins was the memoir of his recently deceased father, William Collins, RA, the popular and prosperous landscape painter, which appeared in 1848. In the memoir, the career of William Collins becomes an equivalent in the arts to the lives of the engineers which Samuel Smiles was to present as exemplary in his mid-nineteenth-century bestsellers, *The Life of George Stephenson, Self-Help* and *Lives of the Engineers*. The engineers of the Industrial Revolution who rose to eminence and riches from humble origins had suggested the scope available for others to do the same. In *The Woman in White,* the always somewhat complacent protagonist, the young drawing-master, Walter Hartright, remarks early on of his father that 'Thanks to his admirable prudence and self-denial my mother and sister were left, after his death, as independent of the world as they had been during his lifetime.' Prudence, self-denial, independence: these were pre-eminently the bourgeois virtues. The writing of the memoir was a devotedly filial labour, and such virtues were unlikely to be slighted as subscribed to and practised in his own time by William Collins. The fiction, however, recurrently parodies what Collins terms in the preface to *Armadale* 'the claptrap morality of the present day', and the sincerity is suspect of the filial biographer who competes with his subject in morality. Enthusiastic as is the son's homage to the father's genius, in the account of the painter's career the stress falls less on the genius than on the moral virtues which all might cultivate and to whose material efficacy the successful

career was a tribute. The peroration to one moralistic digression refuses to be an apology.

> These remarks may appear to delay unnecessarily the progress of this Memoir, but they are suggested by the great truth which the career of Mr Collins illustrates – that the powers of the mind, however brilliant, are never too elevated to be aided by the moral virtues of the character; and that between the aims of the intellect and the discipline of the disposition, it is intended that there should exist an all-important connexion, which the pride of genius may easily sever, but which the necessities of genius are never enabled to spare.

The moralism informing the *Memoirs* is derided in *The Woman in White*. Though recent criticism has rightly been interested in images of women and issues of gender in the fiction, it is especially the undermining of the traditional bourgeois ethic of self-help, in crisis though much preached still in the 1860s, and far from dead as an ideological force, as the 1870s and even the 1980s might demonstrate, which alarmed reviewers of the sensation fiction of Collins and prompted some of their more dismissive and patronising judgements.

Compliments to William Collins are not only in exemplary early Victorian taste but also poles apart from what would be remarked of the bulk of his son's work, from *Antonina,* in 1850, onwards. 'In *him*, taste was essentially a happy and kindly gift; for it made him especially the painter for the young, the innocent and the gentle. Throughout the whole series of his works, they could look on none that would cause them a thrill of horror, or a thought of shame.' On 24 June 1854, the reviewer and novelist, Geraldine Jewsbury, writing in the *Athenaeum*, welcomed *Hide and Seek,* which followed *Antonina* and Collins' second novel, *Basil,* thus:

> In *Antonina* and *Basil* Mr Collins showed himself possessed of gifts of genius; but in those works his strength was like the strength of fever, and his knowledge of human nature resembled a demonstration in morbid anatomy. Over both those works there hung a close, stifling, unwholesome odour: if fascinating, they were not wholesome; if powerful, they were not pleasant. In his present work, *Hide and Seek*, he has ceased walking the moral hospital to which he has hitherto confined his excursions. Here we have health and strength together.

Even the novels preceding *Hide and Seek* show biases quite at odds with those of Collins' sensation phase, though the sensation fiction would attract opprobrium couched in curiously similar terms. Geraldine Jewsbury would have been provoked by two scenes in particular in *Antonina* and *Basil.* In *Antonina,* a licentious cat-worshipping Roman senator intrudes on the eponymous heroine in her bedchamber and revels in the sight of her state of undress. In *Basil,* the eponymous hero is an anguished but spellbound listener rather than a voyeur as, through the 'boards papered over' which divide two rooms in a shabby hotel, filter the sounds accompanying the act of adultery between his yet virginal bride of a year and her father's confidential clerk. '*I heard and I knew* – knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror,' recalls Basil as narrator.

If Geraldine Jewsbury was shocked by what for the time was the unusual sexual candour of the scene in *Basil,* to suggest female sexual promiscuity as a potentiality was indelicate in a wider sense. Dr Johnson had long ago insisted that 'all the property of the world depends' upon female chastity, and that 'confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime' of adultery, so that while 'wise married women don't trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands', wifely infidelity was unforgivable. Charges couched in similar terms to those of 'walking the moral hospital' were much elicited by the sensation fiction of the 1860s, and seem to have been as liable to be provoked by moral or social heterodoxy as by salaciousness. The early fiction, however, even though occasionally salacious, is relatively compliant to the prejudices of the middle-class reader. *Antonina* is a historical romance of the fifth century: historical romance was the fictional vogue of the 1830s and 1840s, and though when Collins began writing fiction, the market was in decline, historical romance remained an obvious choice for any aspiring and commercially astute

young novelist. Caught between the Scylla of orgulous nobles and the Charybdis of slaves who steal his flocks and ravage his cornfields, a despairing Roman farmer is ready to welcome the Goths: he is, alas, no visionary.

> . . . Could he have imagined how, in after years, the ‘middle class’, despised in his day, was to rise to privilege and power; to hold in its just hands the balance of the prosperity of nations; to crush oppression and regulate rule; to soar in its mighty flight above thrones and principalities, and ranks and riches, apparently obedient, but really commanding – could he but have foreboded this, what a light must have burst upon his gloom, what a hope must have soothed him in his despair!

Admittedly, *Basil,* with a modern setting, is less ingratiating to the middle class than might have been anticipated from this gratuitous tribute from the fifth century. The implied alternatives which emerge to middle-class values, however, are those of the aristocracy or gentry. By contrast, what would seem to characterize at least the first two-thirds of the 1860s as the age of sensation is a sense of the possibility of social transformation in the fairly immediate future, so that hostility to the present can dispense with nostalgia. If the middle class is not treated kindly in *The Woman in White,* nor is the hypochondriacal Frederick Fairlie, representing the country gentry (but somewhat of a spent force, as he would acknowledge), presented as admirable.

Of the novels succeeding to *Basil* in the 1850s, *Hide and Seek*, published in 1854, and for which Geraldine Jewsbury gave much thanks, tends to be Dickens-and-water, as Dickens partially conceded to his less charitable (where Collins was concerned) sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth. The evangelically respectable Mr Thorpe is revealed as a seducer, but such a revelation is minimally subversive. The more radical option is to challenge respectable values, as do the sensation novels of the 1860s. While *The Dead Secret*, published in 1857, is more impressive, its radicalism may be contained in a moral which Leonard, the heroine’s husband

but a chilly snob, merely would be more agreeable for bearing in mind: that the highest honours are ‘conferred by LOVE and TRUTH’.

The novelist and critic, Margaret Oliphant, commented in her review, ‘Sensation Novels’, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in May 1862, on the completeness with which the domestic saga, the vogue in middle-class popular fiction in the 1850s, had been superseded by the sensation novel. She complimented Wilkie Collins on being the first novelist since Sir Walter Scott to keep readers up all night over a novel:

> Domestic histories, however virtuous and charming, do not often attain the result – nor, indeed, would an occurrence so irregular and destructive of all domestic proprieties be at all a fitting homage to the virtuous chronicles which have lately furnished the larger part of our light literature.

So marked a switch of taste in the readership from domestic saga – two of the more prominent examples of which were Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) and Dinah Mulock’s *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) – to sensation novel asks to be related to the historical currents of the period: events, but also thoughts and emotions about the events or apparently imminent events.

In *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, the historian, E. J. Hobsbawm, remarks that the economic boom of the first seven years of the 1850s sent politics into ‘hibernation’. ‘In Britain Chartism died away . . . Parliamentary reform ceased to occupy British politicians for a while . . . Even the middle-class radicals, Cobden and Bright, having achieved the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, were now an isolated fringe minority in politics.’ The period of quietude ended with the depression of 1857.

> Economically speaking, this was merely an interruption of the golden age of capitalist growth which resumed on an even larger scale in the 1860s and reached its peak in the boom of 1871–3. Politically it transformed the situation. Admittedly it disappointed the hopes of revolutionaries, who had expected it to produce another 1848 . . . Yet politics did revive. Within a short space of time all the old questions of liberal politics were once again on the agenda – Italian and

German national unification, constitutional reform, civil liberties and the rest. Whereas the economic expansion of 1851–7 had taken place in a political vacuum, prolonging the defeat and exhaustion of 1848–9, after 1859 it coincided with increasingly intense political activity.

A sense of crisis and upheaval is to be traced in the writings of contemporaries. George Augustus Sala knew Wilkie Collins from the days when both were on the staff of *Household Words*, the weekly periodical edited by Dickens which preceded *All the Tear Round.* In his autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala,* Sala compared the International Exhibition of 1862 with the Great Exhibition of 1851, which was housed in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace in Hyde Park.

The display presented two conspicuous departures from the lines laid down in 1851. In that year, no modern weapon of war was to be seen in the palace of glass and iron. In 1862 section after section showed cannon, gun, muskets, rifles, pistols, swords, daggers, and other munitions of warfare. The promoters of the First Exhibition had thought, good souls! that the thousand years of war were over, and that the thousand years of peace were to be inaugurated; but they had awakened from that dulcet dream in 1862. Solferino and Magenta had been fought, and the great American Civil War was impending.

Margaret Oliphant explained the vogue for the sensation novel in terms of the *Zeitgeist*: 'it is natural that art and literature should, in an age which has turned to be one of events, attempt a kindred depth of effect and shock of incident'. Like Sala, Oliphant was impressed by the contrast between the mood of the 1860s and the optimisim of 1851: 'we who once did, and made, and declared ourselves masters of all things, have relapsed into the natural size of humanity before the great events which have given a new character to the age'. Margaret Oliphant was thinking of wars abroad and particularly the American Civil War:

That distant roar has come to form a thrilling accompaniment to the safe life we lead at home. On the other side of the Atlantic, a race *blasée* and lost in universal *ennui* has bethought itself of the grandest expedient for procuring a new sensation; and albeit we follow at a humble distance, we too begin to feel the need of a supply of new shocks and wonders.

Margaret Oliphant may be suspected of being disingenuous in contrasting thrilling America with safe England. The English fascination with events in America was because the war seemed provoked by something more urgent than *ennui*. As did the English monied classes generally, *The Times* supported the South because it was assumed to be rebelling against democracy. In the 1860s, with the emergence of an organized trades union movement and vigorous campaigns for an extension of the franchise, democracy was a prospect much contemplated in England. The Civil War was a terrible warning which English democrats would do well to heed: it certainly encouraged their opponents to think that the triumph of democracy was not inevitable. Reviewers stressed the contemporaneity of setting of sensation novels as a distinguishing feature, and H. L. Mansel, in a marathon review of sensation fiction, explained that it was necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by the explosion. Unlike most of his emulators, however, whose opening chapters are indeed set three or four years back to allow the plot to culminate in the present, Collins was exploring the pre-history of the mood of crisis in the 1860s. The sensational plots of both *The Woman in White* and *Armadale*, Collins' third sensation novel of the 1860s, culminate in what Lydia Gwilt, the red-haired and seductive murderess in *Armadale*, sacrilegiously refers to as 'the worn-out old year eighteen hundred and fifty-one'. Like some recent historians of the age, Collins was sceptical of even the briefest period of mid-Victorian 'calm'.

What may be termed the first 'sensation scene' of *The Woman in White* is that of Walter Hartright's meeting with Anne Catherick on Avenue Road. Hartright is walking back late on a summer night from his mother's cottage in Hampstead to his chambers in Lincoln's Inn. Henry Dickens remembered his father comparing the episode with Thomas Carlyle's account in *The French Revolution* of the march of the Parisian women to Versailles: these were the 'two

scenes in literature which he regarded as being the most dramatic descriptions he could recall'. This is an intriguing comment so far as the scene in *The Woman in White* is concerned, since nothing happens that is obviously dramatic, following the actual entrance of Anne Catherick, the woman in white. As much as Carlyle, however, even if characteristically less strenuously, Collins captures an historical moment.

While praising the characterization of Marian Halcombe and Count Fosco, admirers of *The Woman in White* have often complained that Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie are a disappointingly standard hero and heroine. The complaint is misconceived: the hero and heroine are conventional; their characterization is not. There is a neat irony to the naming of Collins' protagonist. Hartright sounds like a character in a morality play, and, in the mid-nineteenth century, society was conventionally perceived as morality play. Those with a right heart succeeded while others failed. Hartright has to adjust to the more complex social actuality. By the late 1840s, it was becoming increasingly difficult to believe in the validity of the moral ethic which was derived from *laissez-faire* economics, though the ethic was preached all the more sternly in the face of doubt. Recommending self-help to the poor, remarks a modern historian of the period, J. F. C. Harrison, was like telling them to 'lift themselves up by their own bootstraps'. Collins shows a cynicism beginning to attach to the inculcation of respectable values. In *The Woman in White,* Mrs Catherick is praised for her 'independence of feeling' in consigning (at Sir Percival Glyde's expense) her daughter, Anne, to a private asylum. Enunciating the principle that 'a truly wise mouse is a truly good mouse', Fosco parodies the naiveté of Laura without being himself more worldly wise than other contemporary moralists.

There is a real-life equivalent to Walter Hartright's progress towards enlightenment in *The Woman in White.* 'To

Mr Collins,' wrote Henry James, 'belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors.' During the years in which *The Woman in White* is set, and in conducting the inquiries which eventually were to yield his *magnum opus, London Labour and the London Poor*, the pioneering investigative sociologist, Henry Mayhew, was introducing readers of the *Morning Chronicle* to mysteries at their own doors. Douglas Jerrold asked a correspondent, Mrs Cowden Clarke, in 1850:

> Do you devour those marvellous revelations of the inferno of misery, or wretchedness, that is smouldering under our feet? We live in a mockery of Christianity that, with the thought of its hypocrisy, makes us sick. We know nothing of this terrible life that is about us – us, in our smug respectability.

Mayhew is initially an orthodox moralist, insistent that much of the misery of the poor derived from their own fecklessness and improvidence. Introducing an account of the London costermongers, he remarked ruefully that 'the hearth, which is so sacred a symbol to all civilized races as being the spot where the virtues of each succeeding generation are taught and encouraged, has no charms for them'. Mayhew's report on the costermongers, however, showed that they spurned the hearth with impunity: although they rarely married, social chaos did not result and community life continued. Mayhew came to appreciate that, so far from bad morals causing poverty, poverty caused the bad morals. Burlesquing the language of orthodoxy, he wrote of the casual dock-labourer's improvidence that it was:

> due, therefore, not to any particular malformation of his moral constitution, but to the precarious character of his calling. His vices are the vices of ordinary human nature . . . If the very winds could whistle away the food and firing of wife and children, I doubt much whether, after a week's or a month's privation, we should many of us be able to prevent ourselves from falling into the very same excesses.