The Woman in White

"I have stopped in every chapter to notice some instance of ingenuity, or some happy turn of writing."
Charles Dickens

"A master of plot and situation."
T.S. Eliot

"To Mr Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors."
Henry James

"You can't help feeling that Wilkie Collins was more in tune with modernity than his friend Charles Dickens."
Nicholas Lezard – The Guardian

"Why do Collins's novels read so well today? You need more than sex, drugs and a splash of melodrama to keep people reading your books for 130 years. I suspect that the main reason is that he understood so well the basic technique of attracting and keeping readers."
Andrew Taylor

"The most popular novel of the nineteenth century, and still one of the best plots in English literature."
Sarah Waters

ALMA CLASSICS

The Woman in White

Wilkie Collins

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Contents

Wilkie Collins (1824–89)

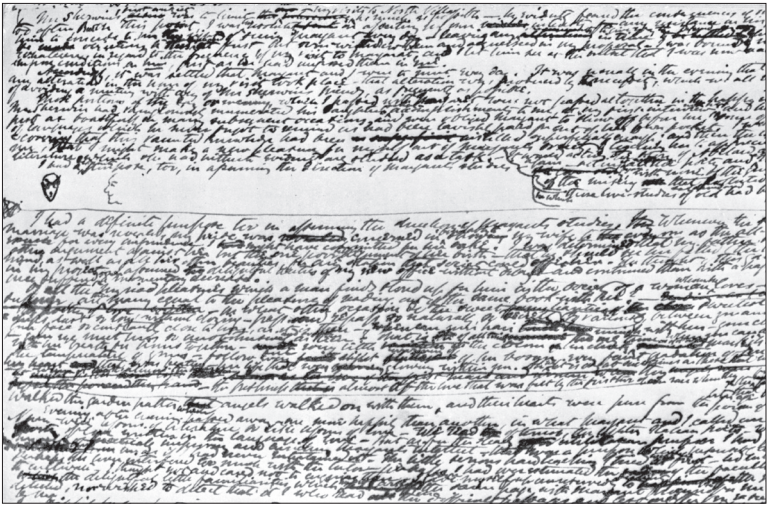
William Collins,
Wilkie's father

Harriet Collins,
Wilkie's mother

Caroline Graves

Martha Rudd

Wilkie Collins as a child, sketched by William Collins (top left), and in an 1851 oil painting by J.E. Millais



Detail from a draft manuscript of Wilkie Collins's 1852 novel *Basil*

Wilkie Collins's house in
Gloucester Place, London

The Woman in White

Preface [1860]

AN EXPERIMENT IS ATTEMPTED IN THIS NOVEL, which has not (so far as I know) been hitherto tried in fiction. The story of the book is told throughout by the characters of the book. They are all placed in different positions along the chain of events, and they all take the chain up in turn, and carry it on to the end.

If the execution of this idea had led to nothing more than the attainment of mere novelty of form, I should not have claimed a moment's attention for it in this place. But the substance of the book, as well as the form, has profited by it. It has forced me to keep the story constantly moving forwards, and it has afforded my characters a new opportunity of expressing themselves – through the medium of the written contributions which they are supposed to make to the progress of the narrative.

In writing these prefatory lines, I cannot prevail on myself to pass over in silence the warm welcome which my story has met with, in its periodical form, among English and American readers. In the first place, that welcome has, I hope, justified me for having accepted the serious literary responsibility of appearing in the columns of *All the Year Round*, immediately after Mr Charles Dickens had occupied them with the most perfect work of constructive art that has ever proceeded from his pen.* In the second place, by frankly acknowledging the recognition that I have obtained thus far, I provide for myself an opportunity of thanking many correspondents (to whom I am personally unknown) for the hearty encouragement I received from them while my work was in progress. Now while the visionary men and women, among whom I have been living so long, are all leaving me, I remember very gratefully that "Marian" and "Laura" made such warm friends in many quarters that I was peremptorily cautioned at a serious crisis in the story to be careful how I treated them – that Mr Fairlie found sympathetic fellow sufferers, who remonstrated with me for not making Christian allowance for the state of his nerves – that Sir Percival's "secret" became sufficiently exasperating in course of

time to be made the subject of bets (all of which I hereby declare to be "off") – and that Count Fosco suggested metaphysical considerations to the learned in such matters (which I don't quite understand to this day), besides provoking numerous enquiries as to the living model from which he had been really taken. I can only answer these last by confessing that many models, some living, and some dead, have "sat" for him, and by hinting that the Count would not have been as true to nature as I have tried to make him if the range of my search for materials had not extended, in his case as well as in others, beyond the narrow human limit which is represented by one man.

In presenting my book to a new class of readers in its complete form, I have only to say that it has been carefully revised, and that the divisions of the chapters, and other minor matters of the same sort, have been altered here and there, with a view to smoothing and consolidating the story in its course through these volumes. If the readers who have waited until it was done only prove to be as kind an audience as the readers who followed it through its weekly progress, *The Woman in White* will be the most precious impersonal Woman on the list of my acquaintance.

Before I conclude, I am desirous of addressing one or two questions of the most harmless and innocent kind to the Critics.

In the event of this book being reviewed, I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second-hand? As that story is written by me – with the inevitable suppressions which the periodical system of publication forces on the novelist – the telling it fills more than a thousand closely printed pages. No small portion of this space is occupied by hundreds of little "connecting links", of trifling value in themselves, but of the utmost importance in maintaining the smoothness, the reality and the probability of the entire narrative. If the critic tells the story *with* these, can he do it in his allotted page, or column, as the case may be? If he tells it *without* these, is he doing a fellow labourer in another form of art the justice which writers owe to one another? And lastly, if he tells it at all, in any way whatever, is he doing a service to the reader, by destroying beforehand two main elements in the attraction of all stories – the interest of curiosity and the excitement of surprise?

Harley Street, London,
3rd August 1860

Preface to the Present Edition [1861]

The Woman in White has been received with such marked favour by a very large circle of readers that this volume scarcely stands in need of any prefatory introduction on my part. All that it is necessary for me to say on the subject of the present edition – the first issued in a portable and popular form – may be summed up in few words.

I have endeavoured, by careful correction and revision, to make my story as worthy as I could of a continuance of the public approval. Certain technical errors which had escaped me while I was writing the book are here rectified. None of these little blemishes in the slightest degree interfered with the interest of the narrative – but it was as well to remove them at the first opportunity out of respect to my readers, and in this edition accordingly they exist no more.

Some doubts having 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. A solicitor of great experience in his profession most kindly and carefully guided my steps, whenever the course of the narrative led me into the labyrinth of the law. Every doubtful question was submitted to this gentleman, before I ventured on putting pen to paper, and all the proof sheets which referred to legal matters were corrected by his hand before the story was published. I can add, on high judicial authority, that these precautions were not taken in vain. The "law" in this book has been discussed, since its publication, by more than one competent tribunal, and has been decided to be sound.

One word more, before I conclude, in acknowledgment of the heavy debt of gratitude which I owe to the reading public.

It is no affectation on my part to say that the success of this book has been especially welcome to me, because it implied the recognition of a literary principle which has guided me since I first addressed my readers in the character of a novelist.

I have always held the old-fashioned opinion that the primary object of a work of fiction should be to tell a story, and I have never believed that the novelist who properly performed this first condition of his art was in danger, on that account, of neglecting the delineation of character – for this plain reason, that the effect produced by any narrative of events is essentially dependent, not on the events themselves, but on the human interest which is directly connected with them. It may be possible in novel-writing to present characters successfully without telling a story, but it is not possible to tell a story successfully without presenting characters: their existence, as recognizable realities, being the sole condition on which the story can be effectively told. 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.

The reception accorded to *The Woman in White* has practically confirmed these opinions, and has satisfied me that I may trust to them in the future. Here is a novel which has met with a very kind reception, because it is a story, and here is a story the interest of which – as I know by the testimony, voluntarily addressed to me, of the readers themselves – is never disconnected from the interest of character. "Laura", "Miss Halcombe" and "Anne Catherick", "Count Fosco", "Mr Fairlie" and "Walter Hartright" have made friends for me wherever they have made themselves known. I hope the time is not far distant when I may meet those friends again, and when I may try, through the medium of new characters, to awaken their interest in another story.

Harley Street, London,
February 1861

Part One

Preamble

THIS IS THE STORY of what a woman's patience can endure, and of what a man's resolution can achieve.

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

But the law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse, and the story is left to be told for the first time in this place. As the judge might once have heard it, so the reader shall hear it now. No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence. When the writer of these introductory lines (Walter Hartright, by name) happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator, and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively as he has spoken before them.

Thus the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect, and to trace the course of one complete series of events by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them at each successive stage relate their own experience, word for word.

Let Walter Hartright, teacher of drawing, aged twenty-eight years, be heard first.