***Woman in White***

### ***Theme and Analysis***

***Summary:***

# The Woman in White | Part 1, Chapter 1 : The First Epoch (The Story Begun by Walter Hartright, of Clement's Inn, Teacher of Drawing) | Summary

[Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Walter_Hartright), a poor drawing master, starts the story by describing his circumstances. He is 28 years old, lives alone in London, makes very little money, and often visits his mother and sister in a London suburb. He then describes his first encounter with Professor Pesca, an Italian language teacher whose life Hartright saves when Pesca nearly drowns. Pesca, overcome with gratitude, is eager to do whatever he can to help Hartright.

One evening, Pesca announces he has recommended Hartright for the position of drawing instructor at the estate of Frederick Fairlie of [Limmeridge House](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/symbols/" \l "Limmeridge_House) in Cumberland. Hartright applies for the assignment and is accepted. He decides to take the job despite feeling "an inexplicable unwillingness" about the position.

On the night before he is to leave, Hartright visits his mother and sister and sets out late in the evening to walk home. Walking along the deserted road, he is accosted by a young woman "dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry." The woman inquires about the way to London and asks for a cab. Hartright, touched by the "loneliness and helplessness of the woman," accompanies her into London. Along the way his companion tells him she has spent many happy days at Limmeridge House with Mrs. Fairlie. She warns him of an unnamed baronet by whom she has been "cruelly used and cruelly wronged." Upon reaching London, Hartright helps the strange woman into a cab and promises not to follow or interfere with her.

As soon as the cab has disappeared, another vehicle pulls up. A passenger jumps out and asks a policeman for help in finding a lost woman. The man says, "She has escaped from my asylum. Don't forget; a woman in white." While Hartright is not surprised that the woman has been in an asylum, he volunteers nothing about his encounter.

The next day, Hartright heads to Limmeridge where he first meets with [Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Marian_Halcombe). Halcombe is young, intelligent, and kind. She explains that Hartright will be teaching drawing to her and her half sister, [Laura Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Laura_Fairlie). In addition, he is to help her uncle, Frederick Fairlie, prepare a collection of drawings for exhibition. She also expresses her pleasure at having a man around the house as, "I don't think much of my own sex, Mr. Hartright." During this conversation, Hartright mentions his encounter with the woman in white. Halcombe is curious and determines to find out who this woman could possibly be.

At lunch, Hartright meets the old governess, Mrs. Vesey, who is extraordinarily dull and sleepy. Later, he meets Laura's guardian and uncle, Frederick Fairlie, the master of the house. He describes Mr. Fairlie as having "a frail, languidly fretful, over-refined look" and a "querulous, croaking voice." Hartright finally meets Halcombe's younger sister, Laura Fairlie, who is as passive as Halcombe is energetic. Despite their differences, however, the two young women are dear friends. Hartright is immediately attracted to Laura. He reflects, "on this first day I let the charm of her presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position."

Hartright spends several months as drawing master, becoming good friends with Halcombe and Laura. Halcombe discovers, after reading through her mother's letters, that the "woman in white" is almost certainly [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick). Anne is described as "a sweet little girl about a year older than our darling Laura" brought to Mrs. Fairlie's school by her mother. Although Anne certainly has a few mental deficiencies, Mrs. Fairlie becomes very fond of the child. She gives her some of Laura's white dresses and tells the girl how pretty she looks in white. Anne responses, "I will always wear white as long as I live." Mrs. Fairlie also notes in her letter that Anne Catherick bears a striking resemblance to her daughter, Laura.

Three months into Hartright's stay at Limmeridge House, he admits to himself that he has fallen in love with Laura. He says nothing to her, but it soon becomes clear that she returns the feelings—although she doesn't say a word. Halcombe takes Hartright aside and tells him, "You must leave Limmeridge House, Mr. Hartright, before more harm is done." She then explains that the issue is not merely the difference in their social standing but rather that Laura is already betrothed. The man to whom she is engaged is a baronet by the name of [Sir Percival Glyde](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Sir_Percival_Glyde), a friend of her late father's. Hartright immediately associates this name with Anne's story of an abusive baronet, although he has no clear reason to do so.

That same day, Laura receives what Halcombe describes as "an anonymous letter—a vile attempt to injure Sir Percival Glyde in my sister's estimation." After some investigation, Hartright discovers that the letter came from Anne Catherick, who is now staying at the home of Mrs. Clements at nearby Todd's Corner. He finds Anne in the graveyard at Mrs. Fairlie's tomb, and engages her in conversation. Although Anne is clearly deranged, he is now certain that it was Sir Percival who shut her up in an asylum.

Hartright tells Halcombe what he has learned. Together they ask Mr. Gilmore, the Fairlie family lawyer, to come and consult with them. Gilmore arrives and agrees to institute inquiries. Hartright spends his last evening at Limmeridge before "the great gulf of separation had opened between us."

Hartright establishes himself as a kindhearted and decent individual with strong, manly feelings and a chivalrous sense of duty. His choice of language and emotional style, however, make it clear that he is also susceptible to premonitions and anxiety. The reader is clearly intended to trust Hartright and accept his forebodings, intuitions, and descriptions. This is despite the fact that they are colored by his emotions and desires.

Hartright's position in society—a poor man of humble origins—becomes a major focus of the novel from the beginning. He proclaims that "the fading summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and, if the truth must be told, out of money as well." Lack of funds means Hartright desperately needs a job. His financial situation pushes him to take the job at Limmeridge, despite his own forebodings.

Once at Limmeridge, Hartright's social and financial position is made very clear. He is essentially a sort of superior servant in the home of the wealthy Fairlie family. This position is not unique to a drawing master. Other middle-class individuals took positions on a similar standing in well-to-do households. Although not exactly servants, they were certainly not on a level with family members. Such individuals—including tutors and governesses—were also in an awkward social position.

Halcombe treats Hartright as an equal, which startles him. He describes Halcombe as being warm and frank but also having "an easy inborn confidence in herself and her position." He notes that "it was more than impossible to take the faintest vestige of a liberty with her."

Hartright's employer, Mr. Fairlie, makes no attempt to suggest that he and Hartright are equals. In fact, he congratulates himself on "possessing" Hartright. Later, he refers to "the horrid English barbarity of feeling about the social position of an artist." His attitude suggests Hartright should be grateful for being treated with even the slightest respect. When Hartright asks permission to leave Limmeridge, Mr. Fairlie simply "informs Mr. Hartright that he may go."

While Hartright appreciates Halcombe 's desire to treat him as an equal, he does not actually expect to be thought of as a social peer. When he falls in love with Laura, he berates himself for doing so. "I should have remembered my position, and have put myself secretly on my guard," he tells himself. He likens his position to that of a pet: "I was admitted among ... captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them." In other words, at Limmeridge Hartright sees himself as less than a man. Instead of resenting his position, he is annoyed with himself for desiring a woman above his station. Later in the narrative, only a change in Laura's social standing makes it possible for the two to finally marry.

Hartright provides exceptionally clear descriptions of each of the characters he encounters. As a result, readers finish the first chapter understanding they are to trust Halcombe 's strength, intelligence, and common sense as well as Laura's innocence and artistic talents. At the same time, the reader is expected to despise Mr. Fairlie's weak-willed hypochondria and believe that [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick) has been ill-used by Sir Percival. Perhaps most significantly, readers are to share Hartright's forebodings about Sir Percival. As Hartright states, "The foreboding of some undiscoverable danger lying ... in the darkness of the future was strong on me."

In this first section, [Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/) has already developed several of his themes and symbols. He has flipped gender-based qualities by establishing Halcombe as a tower of female strength while describing Mr. Fairlie as the opposite of an admirable male figure. He has used the symbol of virginal white to help readers see Anne Catherick as an almost angelic prophet and martyr. And he has set up readers to accept foreshadowing and dark descriptive language as an accurate barometer of events to come.

Foreshadowing and foreboding are both common elements in gothic novels, and The Woman in White has many gothic elements. Gothic novels were extremely popular during the 19th century. Books such as The Mysteries of Udolpho by English novelist Ann Radcliffe introduced some of the gothic themes and imagery used in The Woman in White. Beautiful young women in peril, dangerous noblemen, horrific incarcerations, and dreary or terrifying scenes are all included in Collins's work.

What makes The Woman in White different, however, is the realism of its characters. Hartright is an ordinary working man who never turns out to be a prince in disguise. Halcombe is a conflicted young woman with both strengths and weaknesses. Laura, the naïf, does not overcome her native timidity. Instead, she waits for others to take care of her. This new approach, which combines realism with gothic elements, was dubbed "the sensation novel."

By the end of the first section of the book, Hartright's narrative has also set up the start of a mystery. The reader wonders what Sir Percival's motives really are, and why he is so intent on marrying Laura. At the same time, the reader shares in Hartright's forebodings about the future.

# The Woman in White | Part 1, Chapter 2 : The First Epoch (The Story Continued by Vincent Gilmore) | Summary

This section is introduced in the first person by Mr. Gilmore, the Fairlie family lawyer. He says he has been asked by Hartright to write about events from his own point of view. Mr. Gilmore has known the family for many years, and he is fond of both the sisters—although he despises Mr. Fairlie, the weak, selfish hypochondriac.

Sir Percival arrives at Limmeridge, and impresses Gilmore favorably: he "was so easy and pleasant that we got on together like old friends." Gilmore is particularly impressed by Sir Percival's behavior toward Laura: "a mixture of tenderness and respect, with an unassuming delicacy of tone, voice, and manner."

Gilmore asks Sir Percival to account for the contents of the letter from [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick). Sir Percival says he did, in fact, pay for Anne's stay at a private asylum at the request of Anne's mother. He says he wants only what is best for Anne and believes that would be a return to the asylum. Gilmore sends a letter to Anne's mother, requesting confirmation of this story, and receives it.

Despite reassurances of Sir Percival's innocence and good intentions, Halcombe and Laura both have forebodings about the engagement. In addition, it is clear that Laura still has romantic feelings for Hartright. Sir Percival tells Laura that he will not insist on his rights if she chooses to break the engagement. Nevertheless, about a week after leaving Limmeridge, Gilmore receives a letter saying Laura has decided to marry Sir Percival. Gilmore therefore returns to Limmeridge to write up a "marriage settlement." This document will describe how Laura's significant income and inheritance (about 30,000 pounds) will be distributed during her life and after her death.

Gilmore explains that 10 thousand pounds of Laura's money will go to her aunt (Countess Fosco) if Laura dies before her. In addition, Gilmore intends to settle the money "so as to give the income to the lady for her life—afterward to Sir Percival for his life." The principal of her inheritance is to go to "the children of the marriage." Should there be no children, Laura would leave the principal to Halcombe, her half sister. Sir Percival's lawyer refuses, insisting "The principal ... go to Sir Percival ... in the event of his surviving Lady Glyde, and there being no issue." Gilmore is horrified at the greed inherent in this proposal, but as Laura's guardian will not intervene, he is forced to draw up the papers.

Gilmore provides a very different perspective from Hartright's, and allows the reader to see Sir Percival through the eyes of an outsider. From this viewpoint, Sir Percival is handsome, charming, and able to fool an uncritical observer with his apparently chivalrous and tender behavior toward Laura.

Through Gilmore, [Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/) also provides the reader with critically important information about the status of Laura's wealth. The settlement essentially makes Laura worth a great deal more dead than alive—both to her husband and also to her aunt ([Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco)'s wife).

Finally, this segment provides clear evidence of Sir Percival's intent, Gilmore's reliability as a family friend, and Mr. Fairlie's worthlessness as a guardian. Gilmore tries to protect Laura's interests, pleading "I entreat you to reconsider ... and not to force me to abandon the just rights of your niece." However, because Laura is under age and Mr. Fairlie is interested only in avoiding conflict, Laura is stripped of her inheritance.

The character of Mr. Gilmore is somewhat unusual in Victorian literature. Typically, lawyers are presented in a less-than-pleasant light. For example, Collins's friend Charles Dickens—in his novel Bleak House—calls lawyers "narrow, mean, ignorant pettifoggers." Dickens's lawyers are greasy, dirty, and usually poorly dressed. Mr. Gilmore, however, in Hartright's words, is "in external appearance ... the exact opposite of the conventional idea of an old lawyer." Gilmore is clad immaculately in lavender gloves and a white cravat and "his black coat, waistcoat, and trousers [fit] him with perfect neatness."

Mr. Gilmore is the perfect gentleman and has great regard for both Halcombe and Laura, although he has little respect for Mr. Fairlie. To Gilmore's credit, he treats Hartright respectfully, shares his plans, and engages him in conversation. However, he is blinded to Sir Percival's many failings as a result of his social snobbery. For example, he finds Sir Percival's dishonest explanation of [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick)'s anonymous letter "as simple and satisfactory as I had ... anticipated it would be."

Despite initially being obtuse about Sir Percival's villainy, Gilmore does pick up on one important detail. He notices that the Fairlies' pet dog dislikes Sir Percival and whines in his presence. When this happens, Sir Percival walks quickly away and Gilmore notes "perhaps his temper is irritable at times." As it happens, the dog's judgment regarding Sir Percival is more accurate than Gilmore's own.

Gilmore is also aware of Halcombe's discomfort with Sir Percival, and that concerns him. He describes Halcombe's practical and intelligent nature and says, "she had made me a little uneasy, and a little doubtful." He then brushes off his discomfort, saying, "In my age, I knew better, and went out philosophically to walk it off."

Gilmore is an unreliable narrator in that he misunderstands much of what is going on around him. By the same token, however, he is intuitive enough to sense that there is a problem in the Fairlie home. The reader becomes increasingly anxious as a result of seeing that even a family friend can't see the villainy behind Sir Percival's mask. The reader's foreboding is increased as Mr. Gilmore mentions his intuitive sense that something is wrong.

# The Woman in White | Part 1, Chapter 3 : The First Epoch (The Story Continued by Marian Halcombe) | Summary

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## Summary

After Gilmore leaves for the first time, Laura tells Halcombe she has decided to inform Sir Percival of her love for another—without mentioning Hartright's name. She says she will let Sir Percival himself decide whether or not to continue with their betrothal. Halcombe is shocked by this idea, but she cannot change Laura's mind.

Sir Percival is presented with Laura's statement that she loves someone else, and she offers him the opportunity to break the engagement. He responds, "it is the dearest object of my life to keep the engagement." Laura tells Halcombe, "I must submit, Marian, as well as I can." She gives Halcombe a little book of Hartright's drawings to safeguard in case she dies.

Halcombe has been in contact with Hartright and has used her contacts to help him secure a position with an expedition headed to Central America. She receives a letter from Hartright saying that he has accepted the job and describing the dangers ahead. Halcombe decides to burn the letter rather than worry Laura.

A wedding date is settled on for late December. Halcombe writes in her journal, "Before another month is over our heads she will be his Laura instead of mine! His Laura!" Halcombe can't help but cry "miserable, weak, women's tears of vexation and rage."

Halcombe tries her best to see Sir Percival in the best possible light, but fails. The honeymoon in Europe is planned, and the wedding takes place.

## Analysis

This section of the book is written in the first person, and is presented in the form of Halcombe's journal entries. Readers become aware of her emotional ups and downs, her doubts and fears, her suspicions and her plans.

Halcombe's entries show how much Laura depends on her and how strongly Halcombe feels about her responsibility for Laura's welfare. She is shocked by Laura's definite stand on marrying Sir Percival. For the first time, Halcombe says, "the resolution was all on her side, the hesitation all on mine." She is very clear that she has the ability to shape the direction Laura chooses and is torn about how to use her power.

Halcombe tries valiantly to question her own fears about Sir Percival. She says, "I must and will root out my prejudice against him." She notes that he is a handsome man with "grace and ease of movement, untiring animation of manner, ready, pliant, conversational powers." At the same time, she can't help but notice his "incessant restlessness and excitability" and "his short, sharp, ill-tempered manner of speaking to the servants." It becomes evident that these behaviors are just the tip of the iceberg. By exploring her own prejudices, Halcombe provides readers with insight into both her own character and Sir Percival's. She also creates a clearer picture of a man whose villainy is hidden behind good looks and a charming manner.

Much of this segment is dedicated to exploring the female perspective on the events that have placed Laura and her fortune in Sir Percival's power. Halcombe's frustrations explore the theme of female powerlessness: "No father, no brother—no living creature but the helpless, useless woman who writes these sad lines."

Halcombe's journal entries disclose her fierce loyalty to her sister. Her writing shows her to be open-minded, intelligent, and extraordinarily frustrated with her position in life. Although her sexuality is never mentioned, some commentators have suggested that Halcombe is intended to be a lesbian. This idea is supported to some degree by her reference to Laura as "hers." Certainly, Halcombe never mentions being attracted to any man and makes many comments that suggest she would prefer to have a man's role in the world.

# The Woman in White | Part 2, Chapter 1 : The Second Epoch (The Story Continued by Marian Halcombe) | Summary

Six months later, Halcombe is ensconced at Blackwater Park, Sir Percival's home. She is awaiting Laura's return from her honeymoon in Europe. Halcombe is taken around the residence by Mrs. Michelson, the housekeeper, who describes the house in detail. The living areas are in good repair and furnished in the modern style. Certain very old sections of the building are in decent repair but are nevertheless unused. The residence is partially surrounded by a moat, and there is a lake on the grounds. Halcombe walks out to the lake and finds it inhabited by rats and frogs, offering "dreary impressions of solitude and decay." In a summer house (a gazebo), she discovers a dog that has been beaten nearly to death by the gamekeeper. She is told by the kind Mrs. Michelson that the dog belongs to [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick)'s mother, who is staying nearby in the town of Welmingham. She tries to rescue the dog, but it dies within the hour.

Laura and Sir Percival return, and Halcombe finds her sister changed. Laura no longer seems to have her previous "freshness, a softness, an ever-varying and yet ever-remaining tenderness of beauty."

With Laura and Sir Percival are the Count and Countess Fosco. The Countess, Laura's estranged aunt, was once a wild young woman but is now nearly silent. Halcombe notices the woman "sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself." The Count, however, is almost the opposite. A hugely tall and fat man, he is attractive both in face and manner. He wears foppish clothing and carries with him a cockatoo, as well as canaries and a cage of white mice. These are all pets that he treats with great tenderness. Despite his idiosyncrasies, says Halcombe, "He looks like a man who could tame anything."

A few days later Mr. Merriman, Sir Percival's lawyer, arrives. After a long meeting, Merriman comments to Sir Percival, "it all rests with Lady Glyde." He later makes it clear that Laura is expected to sign several documents which must be witnessed. Later that day, on a walk around the grounds, [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) discovers the blood of Mrs. Catherick's dog on the floor of the summer house. Fosco and Sir Percival learn that Mrs. Catherick—and presumably Anne as well—are nearby.

Percival and Fosco attempt to get Laura to sign some legal papers sight unseen, and to get Halcombe to witness the signature. The women refuse unless Laura can read the documents. Sir Percival is furious, but Fosco pacifies him. After threatening Laura that she'd better sign the papers soon, Sir Percival leaves the house in a rush.

Halcombe decides to write to her lawyer. As Mr. Gilmore is ill, she writes to his associate, Mr. Kyrle. Mr. Kyrle responds almost immediately, warning that Laura should by no means sign any papers without reading them. He says, "a loan of some portion of ... Lady Glyde's fortune is in contemplation, and that she is made a party to the deed." Halcombe is convinced the Foscos have been reading her mail, and intercepts this letter before it can get to the house.

Meanwhile, Laura confesses her marriage is a sham. She says Sir Percival is cruel to her and that she intensely dislikes Fosco. Sir Percival has discovered [Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Walter_Hartright) is the person Laura has fallen in love with—and has threatened his life. While walking in the park, Laura and Halcombe believe they are being followed, but aren't sure whether their stalker is a man or a woman. Laura loses her brooch somewhere near the lake.

That evening, to Halcombe's surprise, Count Fosco announces that Sir Percival no longer wants Laura to sign the papers. Later Halcombe dreams about Hartright. She sees him going through a series of terrible dangers but always saying "I shall come back." She is awakened by Laura, who has seen Anne Catherick at the lake. Anne found her brooch and returned it. After telling Laura she has suffered because of Sir Percival, Anne says, "If you know his secret ... he won't dare use you as he used me." Anne and Laura are interrupted before the secret can be revealed, but they plan to meet again tomorrow at the same time and place.

The following day, the Count and Sir Percival fire Laura's loyal maid, Fanny, and lock Laura in her room. Halcombe learns that Laura went to meet Anne and found a note from her, which Sir Percival read. In part, the note said, "When we speak next of your wicked husband's secret we must speak safely, or not at all." Sir Percival is now convinced that both Anne and Laura know his secret, although Laura actually knows nothing about it.

Seeing that Laura is now a virtual prisoner in her own home, Halcombe writes to Mr. Fairlie and to Mr. Kyrle. She entrusts the letters to Fanny, Laura's maid, who is about to head back to Limmeridge. Fanny is staying at an inn in a nearby town for the night.

Returning to her room, Halcombe can hear Sir Percival and Count Fosco talking below. As often happens, Fosco is urging Sir Percival to be patient and subtle in his plans, while Percival is hot headed and impetuous. Halcombe realizes that she can overhear their entire conversation if she climbs out her window and eavesdrops.

She does so, despite the fact that it is pouring rain. She hears that Fosco has followed her and knows of her correspondence and her meeting with Fanny. She also learns that Fosco admires her intensely: "Can you look at Miss Halcombe and not see that she has the foresight and the resolution of a man?" The two men discuss their mutual debts and Laura's fortune. Fosco concludes by saying, "If your wife lives, you pay those bills with her signature ... If your wife dies, you pay them with her death." Sir Percival also reveals his anxiety about the possibility that his secret has been revealed. He tells Fosco about Anne Catherick, and mentions that Anne looks remarkably like Laura.

Returning to her room, Halcombe develops a high fever. In a postscript to her journal entries—which Fosco reads during her illness—he writes about his dastardly intentions. He then rashly declares, "Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe—how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME."

[Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/) uses Halcombe to incorporate a variety of literary techniques that are common to both gothic novels and the Victorian "sensation" novel. Specifically, he

* uses descriptive language to set a mood of foreboding and to evoke anxiety in the reader;
* describes clandestine meetings and mentions a secret that, if known, will release the heroines from their peril;
* separates the helpless heroines from their masculine saviors. Hartright is in Central America, while their lawyer is ill and unavailable and Laura's guardian is effectively useless;
* includes a character of a madwoman roaming the grounds who is under threat and cannot or will not reveal what she knows;
* places both heroines in immediate danger of their lives.

This technique makes it easy to set up "cliffhangers"—scenes that end before the reader knows the outcome. For example, Laura describes her encounter with Anne, during which Anne discloses that she knows Sir Percival's terrible secret. The reader knows that whoever has the secret will have power over the villainous Sir Percival. Before Anne can disclose the secret, though, she disappears. She says she will return to divulge her knowledge tomorrow, leaving the reader in anxious limbo about what the secret could be. Just as in modern soap operas, Collins sets the stage for suspense and then leaves the audience hanging.

The reason for Collins's use of suspense and cliffhangers is simple. The Woman in White was written for a journal, and was issued in serial form. To bring the reader back for the next installment of the story, Collins needed to set up a question to be answered the following week. With Laura and Halcombe being kept in virtual captivity at Blackwater Park, Collins has set up a "damsels in distress" situation. At the end of each section of the narrative, he leaves the reader wondering how Halcombe and Laura can possibly escape their impending doom.

In addition, however, Collins explores some unusual themes and characterizations. [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) is a unique creation. Although a brilliant, evil mastermind, he is also admiring of—and perhaps even in love with—Halcombe because of her intelligence and strength of character. Fosco, a subtle, educated, patient villain is juxtaposed with the hot-headed Sir Percival—and is presented as having great virtues as well as terrible flaws. Halcombe herself is an unusually strong female character. She uses every opportunity—ethical or unethical—to help herself and her sister and to solve the mystery presented by [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick).

# The Woman in White | Part 2, Chapter 2 : The Second Epoch (The Story Continued by Frederick Fairlie, Esq.) | Summary

Frederick Fairlie is Laura's uncle and guardian (until her marriage), and a hopelessly foppish, frail, and self-centered hypochondriac. Despite his shortcomings, however, he has agreed to tell his part of Laura's story at Hartright's insistence. He describes himself, "shattered by my miserable health and my family troubles, I am incapable of resistance."

Mr. Fairlie picks up the story at the point where Fanny, Laura's maid, arrives at Limmeridge with Halcombe's letter. She explains that Countess Fosco visited her at the inn before she left the neighborhood of Blackwater Park and drugged her. When she regained consciousness she had the letters, but they had been opened and read. Fanny delivers Halcombe's letter for Fairlie to read.

Fairlie reads the letter, which asks that she and Laura be welcomed back at [Limmeridge House](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/symbols/" \l "Limmeridge_House) should they need to leave Blackwater. Fairlie, of course, is perturbed: "I laid down Marian's letter, and felt myself—justly felt myself—an injured man."

A few days later, Fairlie receives a visit from [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco), whom he finds charming, if exhausting. Fosco tells Fairlie that the relationship between Laura and Sir Percival is coming to a head. He insists that Fairlie open his house to Laura. He also guarantees that Sir Percival will not follow or insist on his wife's return. Before leaving, Fosco recommends that Fairlie write and invite Laura to his home while Halcombe recovers from her illness at Blackwater Park. Most significantly, he asks that the letter mention that Laura should stop along the way at Fosco's home in London. Fairlie complies, simply to get rid of Fosco.

This section solidifies the reader's view of Fairlie as a useless, narcissistic, and expendable character who is unwilling to take responsibility for his own actions. His reluctant attitude toward providing his portion of the narrative shows he will act on behalf of others only when threatened with his own discomfort.

Fairlie's lack of interest in other people leads him to pay little attention to Fanny's account of being visited and drugged by Countess Fosco. He thus misses—and wouldn't care about—the implication that Halcombe's notes have been tampered with.

Fairlie neglects any efforts to safeguard his niece, which assists [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) and Sir Percival in enacting their conspiracy regarding Laura and [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick). As Fairlie writes, "I wish to mention, in justice to myself, that it was not my fault, and that I am quite exhausted."

The note that Fairlie provides to Fosco includes an important piece of information that will be significant as the story unfolds. Fosco now has written evidence that Laura has been invited to Limmeridge and is expected to break the journey at Fosco's home in London.

# The Woman in White | Part 2, Chapter 3 : The Second Epoch (The Story Continued by Eliza Michelson) | Summary

Mrs. Michelson is Sir Percival's housekeeper, and the widow of a clergyman "reduced by misfortune to the necessity of accepting a situation." She is therefore a high-level servant who sees herself as a gentlewoman. She mentions, however, that she no longer works for Sir Percival.

Mrs. Michelson picks up the thread of the story at Blackwater Park, at the point where Halcombe falls ill. The local doctor, Mr. Dawson, has come to see Halcombe, and [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) has taken an active interest in Halcombe's treatment. Mrs. Michelson overhears—but doesn't fully understand—conversations between Fosco and Sir Percival that suggest Sir Percival has searched unsuccessfully for [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick).

Mrs. Michelson is tasked with nursing Halcombe and looking after Laura—who won't leave her sister's bedside. Fosco takes it upon himself to bring in Mrs. Rubelle—a nurse from London. Mrs. Michelson describes Rubelle as "a small, wiry, sly person ... with a dark brown or Creole complexion and watchful light gray eyes." Mrs. Rubelle is actually Fosco's spy—although also an excellent nurse.

Mrs. Michelson is charmed by Fosco, and takes his side as he disagrees with Mr. Dawson's management of Halcombe's care. Halcombe takes a turn for the worse but then seems to recover somewhat. Mr. Dawson and Fosco argue vehemently. Dawson, "in a state of extreme indignation at Count Fosco's usage of him," leaves the house in a huff and submits his bill.

Percival calls Mrs. Michelson and tells her "I shall sell the horses, and get rid of all the servants at once." He wants only Mrs. Michelson, the gardener, and one incompetent and dimwitted maid named Margaret Porcher to stay. Mrs. Michelson is aghast, but she follows her orders and fires the staff. She is then sent off to the seaside to find an appropriate place for Halcombe to recover. Sir Percival has stipulated such a low rental rate that this errand is clearly an excuse to get Michelson out of the house.

When Michelson returns unsuccessfully a few days later, she is present when Fosco tells Laura that Halcombe has left Blackwater. She is headed to [Limmeridge House](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/symbols/" \l "Limmeridge_House) with a stopover at Fosco's London home. Laura does not fully believe this story and determines to follow Halcombe, staying overnight at Mrs. Vesey's home in London rather than at Fosco's. Mrs. Michelson helps Laura write to Mrs. Vesey, and Laura leaves the next morning.

That evening, Mrs. Michelson discovers Mrs. Rubelle in the garden and realizes that Halcombe has not left Blackwater at all. In fact, she is being kept in one of the unused wings of the manor. Learning this, Mrs. Michelson is ready to leave Blackwater forever—but she is told by Percival that everyone will be leaving the estate immediately. He states, "If you go at once, Miss Halcombe won't have a soul left here to look after her." Mrs. Michelson, backed into a corner, agrees to stay. She nurses Halcombe until she is well enough to leave, and the two women part in London. Halcombe returns to Limmeridge by train.

Mrs. Michelson ends her narrative by expressing "regret at my own inability to remember the precise day on which Lady Glyde left Blackwater Park."

This section provides some glimpses into societal stratification during England's Victorian era. Mrs. Michelson is essentially a middle-class person in financial difficulties. As a result, she is flattered by Fosco's attentions and his willingness to address her as a lady rather than as a mere servant. At the same time, she is shocked by Sir Percival's language and behavior. She sees herself as bound to Halcombe and Laura not only as an employee but also as a woman.

Fosco understand Mrs. Michelson very well and uses his insights to manipulate her. He treats her with great respect, thus earning her loyalty. Says Mrs. Michelson, "The only person in the house ... who treated me ... on the footing of a lady in distressed circumstances, was the Count." This loyalty leads Mrs. Michelson to give Laura the disastrous suggestion, "in your ladyship's place I should remember the Count's advice."

The Count makes it clear to Mrs. Michelson that he relies on her above all others to do what is right for Halcombe. He later uses her sense of responsibility to force her to stay alone with Halcombe until the invalid recovers.

Fosco's charms and cleverness are so potent that Mrs. Michelson never loses faith in him. She finishes her narrative by saying, "I wish to record ... that no blame whatever, in connection with the events ... attaches to [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco)."

The events in this section of the narrative move the story along rapidly. Fosco uses Mr. Fairlie's invitation to suggest that Laura break her journey at his home. Although she does not trust Fosco, he is able to spirit her off. By separating the two sisters, he furthers the conspiracy.

It is important to note that Fosco's attachment to Halcombe means she is never badly treated. Although she is moved to the unused wing while she is too sick to be aware, she consistently receives appropriate nursing care. However, Halcombe is hidden away until she can no longer interfere with Fosco's plans.

Mrs. Michelson's final note is important to the story, as the date of Laura's departure from Blackwater will become critical to the story's happy ending.

# The Woman in White | Part 2, Chapter 4 : The Second Epoch (The Story Continued in Several Narratives) | Summary

This section of the story includes multiple brief narratives from minor characters. Each narrative either moves the story forward or provides a key bit of evidence regarding the actions of [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) and Sir Percival.

"The Narrative of Hester Pinhorn, Cook in the Service of Count Fosco," is recorded from her spoken testimony, as she is illiterate. She signs with her mark. Pinhorn has been hired to work for the Count and Countess. She and a housemaid are the only servants. Pinhorn describes the arrival at the Count's home of "Lady Glyde." Shortly afterward, the visitor has a seizure—with "her face ghastly white, and her hands fast clenched, and her head drawn down to one side." A local doctor, Mr. Goodricke, is called in, but "Lady Glyde" dies the following day. Plans are made for a funeral in Limmeridge, which Count Fosco attends; says Pinhorn, "He looked grand in his deep mourning, with his big solemn face, and his slow walk, and his broad hatband."

"The Narrative of the Doctor," written by Mr. Goodricke, affirms that a death certificate was signed for Lady Glyde, who died of an aneurism on Thursday, July 25, 1850.

"The Narrative of Jane Gould" affirms that Gould, working for the undertaker, did "what was right and needful by the remains of a lady who had died at the house."

"The Narrative of the Tombstone" records an inscription that reads, in part, "Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde, wife of [Sir Percival Glyde](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Sir_Percival_Glyde), Bart., of Blackwater Park, Hampshire." The date of death is July 25, 1850.

"The Narrative of [Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Walter_Hartright)" describes Hartright's return from Central America and some of his adventures there. While visiting his mother, he learns that Laura has died. He travels to Limmeridge to see her grave. In the cemetery he sees two veiled women. One raises her veil, and he realizes that it is Halcombe. When the second woman raises her veil, Hartright sees, "Laura, Lady Glyde ... standing by the inscription, and ... looking at me over the grave."

In this section, key events are recorded with their associated dates. While it seems, from the preceding chapters, that Fosco has lured Laura to his home, readers know that it is not Laura who died in his house. Thus it is clear that her death, burial, funeral, and tombstone were all false.

Readers are also introduced to another level of Victorian society. In Fosco's London home, several servants have been hired to do menial work. They have been asked to add to the narrative by attesting to specific events. The illiterate Hester Pinhorn, hired to do "plain cooking," tells her story at some length. She starts by declaring, "I know that it is a sin and wickedness to say the thing which is not," sounding very much like a child. Jane Gould, who prepares the corpse for the grave, simply states that she has done what is "necessary."

Both women attest to events in plain language, but neither is capable of thinking beyond what they witness or of questioning events. This is a typical portrayal of servants, who, at that time, were assumed to have little intellectual competence. In The Woman in White, [Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/) is careful to portray only middle- and upper-class individuals as having the ability to think for themselves.

The dramatic graveside moment at which Laura is revealed to be alive is the height of gothic romance. It is also a classic cliffhanger that ends Epoch Two of the novel. The reader is left in painful suspense with many questions left to answer. If Laura is alive, who is in her grave? What happened between the time Laura left Blackwater and the moment when she appears to Hartright? What will happen next?

With the reappearance of Hartright, the story takes a new turn. It is clear that Halcombe has done as much as she can. It is now up to Hartright to help the women regain their lives and bring the villains to justice.

# The Woman in White | Part 3, Chapter 1 : The Third Epoch (The Story Continued by Walter Hartright) | Summary

One week has passed since Hartright returned from Central America and learned that Laura is alive and not buried in Limmeridge. He has rented rooms in London and is living there with Laura and Halcombe under assumed names. He picks up the story in his voice from the point at which Halcombe left Mrs. Michelson and headed back to Limmeridge.

[Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) has given a letter to Laura's uncle, Mr. Fairlie, falsely informing him that [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick) has been returned to an insane asylum. He says that Anne is delusional and believes she is Fairlie's niece, Laura—a result of her discovering the "extraordinary accidental likeness between the deceased lady and herself." Fosco entreats Frederick, therefore, to ignore any letters from the asylum that might suggest that the inmate is, in fact, Laura.

Meanwhile, the Countess Fosco has been sending condolence letters from her home in London to Halcombe at Limmeridge. Halcombe does not answer the letters but has the house watched. She also hires an observer to spy on the Rubelles. In neither case does she collect any new information.

Next, Halcombe writes to the insane asylum where, she believes, Anne Catherick has been incarcerated. Anne, the director writes, is somewhat changed but is doing well. Halcombe visits the asylum, and "Miss Halcombe recognized her sister—recognized the dead alive." Recovering from her shock and realizing that she does not have the means to prove Laura's identity, Halcombe bribes the asylum nurse and rescues Laura.

On the train heading back to Limmeridge, Laura tells Halcombe her story—although she can't remember the dates involved. Laura left Blackwater for London and was met at the station by Count Fosco. At Fosco's London home, she was drugged. She woke up at the asylum, in Anne's clothes, under Anne's name.

At Limmeridge, Halcombe presents Laura to her Uncle Frederick. However, Mr. Fairlie has been forewarned by Fosco's letter and insists the woman is Anne Catherick masquerading as Laura. He says Halcombe has been duped into believing her sister is alive. Halcombe realizes that Laura's escape will be noticed by now and that Fosco and Sir Percival will be on their way to Limmeridge. Before making their escape, the sisters stop by the churchyard and there run into Hartright.

Hartright, Halcombe, and Laura settle down in London. Hartright makes some money as an illustrator, while Halcombe keeps house. Together, they help Laura recover her spirits—but they are unable to help her recall anything more about her traumatic abduction. Hartright begins investigations that he hopes will reveal Sir Percival's secret and help in the process of restoring Laura's identity.

Hartright collects statements from the people involved with Halcombe's illness and Anne Catherick's death. He also visits the lawyer, Mr. Kyrle. Kyrle tells Hartright he hasn't a chance of restoring Laura's name unless he can prove Laura left Blackwater Park after her supposed death in London. As no one can remember the date on which Laura left Blackwater, the situation seems hopeless.

Returning home, Hartright hands Halcombe a note with her name on it, entrusted to him by Mr. Kyrle. The letter is from Fosco. In it, he makes it clear that he knows Laura has escaped the asylum and is with Halcombe, for whom he has the highest esteem. Fosco will take no action if Halcombe will "advance no farther than you have gone already, compromise no serious interests, threaten nobody." Halcombe is furious and insists Hartright continue his investigation.

Hartright goes to Blackwater to gather information about Sir Percival and Fosco but meets only the gardener and the feeble-minded Margaret Porcher. He then searches for Mrs. Clements, the woman who has looked after Anne Catherick for many years. Mrs. Clements relates how she and Anne came to Blackwater to see Laura. She says at that time it became clear that Anne was very ill. Fosco approached Mrs. Clements and offered to help them return to London. About a week after their return, Countess Fosco arrived at the door, gave Anne a message, and disappeared with her in a carriage. Mrs. Clements never saw Anne again.

Mrs. Clements then tells Hartright the story of the Catherick family. Like Mrs. Clements, Mr. Catherick was born in the village of Old Welmingham. His wife, Jane, an outsider, was unwilling to marry him but suddenly said "yes," and quickly became pregnant. She was then visited by Sir Percival with whom she had secret liaisons and from whom she received valuable gifts. This led her husband to believe that Sir Percival was the father of her child. Feeling deceived, Mr. Catherick left for America before Anne was born. Mrs. Catherick stayed in Old Welmingham with her illegitimate daughter, who looked nothing like Sir Percival or Mr. Catherick.

Mrs. Clements also explains why Anne was confined to an asylum. Clements reveals, "her mother had got some secret of Sir Percival's ... Sir Percival found [Anne] knew it [and] shut her up." Mrs. Clements doubts Anne actually had knowledge of Sir Percival's secret—as she would at some point have told it to her friend.

Hartright sets off to find Mrs. Catherick in Old Welmingham. She is a nasty woman who is neither surprised nor saddened to hear of her daughter's death. Catherick refuses to tell Hartright anything about Sir Percival. She reveals, "There is no news of Sir Percival that I don't expect ... except the news of his death." She scoffs at the idea that Percival is a gentleman to be reckoned with and suggests he was lowborn on his mother's side.

Hartright next goes to the church at Old Welmingham, where he hopes to find records of Sir Percival's parents. He finds their marriage recorded in the old church register book, written in a very small space at the bottom of a page. There seems no question that Sir Percival's mother was anything other than a gentlewoman. Hartright continues to search for more evidence, this time from the lawyer who would know more about the Glyde family. On his way, he is followed by two men who create an incident for which Hartright is briefly jailed—thereby slowing him down.

Despite his incarceration, Hartright proceeds to the lawyer's office where he is shown the duplicate records of local marriages. In the spot where the record of Sir Percival's parents' marriage should be, Hartright sees "Nothing!" There was no "entry which recorded the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde and Cecilia Jane Elster in the register of the church!" This was Sir Percival's secret: "he had no more claim to the baronetcy and ... Blackwater Park than the poorest laborer who worked on the estate."

Hartright now determines to get the register book from the church at Old Welmingham so as to have evidence of Sir Percival's forgery. When he arrives, however, Percival is already there—locked into the vestry. The vestry catches fire, and Percival cannot escape, although Hartright tries to rescue him. Both Sir Percival and the church register book are burned beyond recognition.

Hartright cannot return to London until the inquest on Percival is complete, and he appears in front of the magistrate at Knowlesbury. While he is relaxing at the inn he receives a letter from Mrs. Catherick—who is thrilled to hear of Sir Percival's death. She admits in the letter that, in exchange for gifts, she gave Percival keys to the church vestry. Thus he was able to forge an entry in the register book. Percival, however, is not Anne's father.

In the Third Epoch, Hartright is a changed man. Returned from his adventures in Central America, he has been through many trials. He now knows that he can face and overcome danger. In addition, because of the change in Laura and Halcombe's social status, Hartright is now their peer. This means he can legitimately become their friend and protector. While in the First Epoch Hartright was merely a hired drawing master, in the Third Epoch he is a hero.

The Third Epoch is also the point at which the narrative changes radically. This is no longer a tale of damsels in distress, threatened by villains at every turn. It is now the story of an investigator seeking answers to a mystery. By uncovering the mysteries of Anne Catherick—the Woman in White—and of Sir Percival's secret, Hartright believes he can help Laura recover her identity.

Until this point, The Woman in White has been a sensation novel, focused on emotions and descriptions. Now it becomes one of the first mystery novels ever written.

In 1841 American author Edgar Allen Poe published the short story "Murders in the Rue Morgue," which is known as the first true mystery. Elements in that story include an investigation by the bumbling police and a bright amateur sleuth. The Notting Hill Mystery, published in 1865 by English author Charles Warren Adams under the pen name Charles Felix, is widely known as the first detective novel. Others say that [Wilkie Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/)'s 1868 book The Moonstone, inspired the genre of the detective mystery. English crime novelist Dorothy L. Sayers called The Moonstone "probably the finest detective story ever written."

Those who argue that The Woman in White is one of the first mystery novels point to events that begin with Hartright's return to England. At this point, Hartright becomes an amateur sleuth. He spends almost all his time investigating the crimes of Sir Percival and [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco). Along the way he collects clues and red herrings from various witnesses and suspects. He is also followed, watched, and attacked by Fosco's agents, overcomes obstacles, and discovers the truth. To finally outsmart Fosco, Hartright must place himself in danger by confronting the criminal. These are all elements that became part of the increasingly popular detective/mystery genre.

Hartright starts his investigation by pursuing the elusive "secret," mentioned several times by [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick). This secret, he hopes, will help prove Sir Percival's guilt and Laura's identity. The search for Sir Percival's secret leads Hartright through a labyrinth of possibilities, each worse than the previous one.

At first, he believes that Anne is Sir Percival's illegitimate child—a scandal, but an ordinary scandal. This possibility turns out to be unlikely, based on Mrs. Catherick's evidence. More importantly, Mr. Catherick left his wife believing that she had had an adulterous affair with Sir Percival. Virtually everyone in town knew why he left. Clearly, even if Percival were Anne's father, it wasn't a secret that could destroy his wealth and reputation.

Next, Hartright believes perhaps Sir Percival's parentage is not quite what it should be. This also would be a secret of less-than-monumental proportions. He builds this belief on a hint dropped by Mrs. Catherick, but it turns out to be a dead end.

Finally, Hartright discovers that Percival himself is neither a legitimate child nor a baronet. This means that he is neither the rightful heir to Blackwater nor to the money associated with the manor. In fact, Sir Percival is a complete fraud. Percival's death in a blazing church while trying to conceal his crimes is likely a metaphor for his descent to the flames of hell.

Unfortunately for Hartright, Percival's death means Hartright has lost his only proof of the fake baronet's crimes. Worse, Hartright is no nearer to reestablishing Laura's identity. At the same time, having taken definite action against Percival and Fosco, Hartright knows he has earned Fosco's wrath. The Count, a much more formidable foe than Percival, will surely do his worst.

In her letter to Hartright, Mrs. Catherick reveals herself to be heartless, conniving, and narcissistic. She thanks Hartright for being the instrument of Percival's death. At the same time, she complains, "You were weak enough, as I have heard, to try and save his life." She also confirms Percival's villainy—he was willing to victimize absolutely anyone in order to achieve his purely self-centered goals.

After describing her crimes and horrific willingness to injure others, she reminds Hartright that, after decades, she has managed to repair her reputation in town. This has become a significant source of pride: "I will allow no liberties to be taken with my reputation." This juxtaposition of pride in wrongdoing and pride in an "unsullied" reputation provides some dark humor as well as a bit of social commentary.

# The Woman in White | Part 3, Chapter 2 : The Third Epoch (The Story Continued by Walter Hartright) | Summary

Hartright receives an urgent note from Halcombe saying she and her sister have been obliged to change residence. Hartright is therefore eager to leave for London—but stays long enough to learn the name of the true heir to Blackwater Park. He also confirms that Laura's inheritance has been totally spent.

Returning to London, Hartright finds that Halcombe and Laura are now living in Fulham, a more countrified area. Halcombe confides that the reason for the move is simple—Count Fosco had discovered their whereabouts. Laura, however, believes that the move is simply to find nicer accommodations.

Halcombe describes the conversation she had with Fosco. He told Halcombe he was aware of Percival and of Hartright's movements but took no action. His decision was based on his warm admiration for Halcombe. She says with disgust, "the one weak point in that man's iron character is the horrible admiration he feels for me." Fosco also delivers a warning to Hartright through Halcombe, "if he stirs me, he has Fosco to deal with ... Fosco sticks at nothing."

Hartright continues with his investigations. He learns that Philip Fairlie, Laura's father, was in the right place at the right time to be [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick)'s father. He was also "the spoilt darling of society, especially of the women." Clearly, Laura and Anne had been half sisters, which would explain their surprisingly similar appearance.

Several months go by. Hartright tells Laura of her husband's death, and the two are married.

Hartright now turns his attention to learning more about Fosco. Re-reading Halcombe's journals, he realizes that Fosco had received many official-looking letters from Italy. He determines that Fosco must be a spy. Hartright visits Fosco's house secretly and follows him through the streets. As a result, he learns Fosco will be attending the opera Lucrezia Borgia that evening. Hartright buys two tickets and invites his friend Professor Pesca to attend. He hopes that Pesca, who is also an expatriate Italian, might recognize Fosco.

At the opera, Pesca does not recognize Fosco, but Fosco clearly recognizes Pesca—and is fearful of him. Pesca confesses that years ago he became a member of an Italian secret society whose members can be identified by a hidden tattoo. Members of the society did not necessarily know one another. At any time, a member of the society might be called upon to secretly assassinate someone. Any individual who betrayed the society would, of course, be killed. Says Pesca, "a man discovered by the chiefs is dead. No human laws can protect him."

Hartright immediately realizes that Fosco must also be a member of the Italian secret society. He writes to Pesca saying, "The man whom I pointed out ... is a member of the Brotherhood, and has been false to his trust." The letter asks Pesca to "use the power entrusted to you without mercy" should Hartright fail to return. He then goes to Fosco's home.

Hartright confronts Fosco and tells him that he knows everything and has shared what he knows with Pesca. Fosco, baffled, agrees to write a confession that will restore Laura's identity. He makes one condition: that he and his wife be given enough time to escape the country. Hartright agrees. Fosco also provides a signed letter from Percival saying that Laura left Blackwater on the 26th—a day after her supposed death certificate was signed.

This section of the story contains yet more classically "sensational" and gothic elements. They include adultery between Mrs. Catherick and Philip Fairlie, mistaken identity involving half sisters [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick) and Laura, and a romanticized secret society of assassins. In addition, [Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/) stages the encounter between Fosco and Pesca at the opera Lucrezia Borgia—the story of a murderer.

This portion of the narrative also confirms some key details from earlier chapters. Specifically, despite Laura's emotional trauma, she still loves Hartright and wants to be his wife. Halcombe remains strong, intelligent, and resourceful. As ever, Fosco is boastful, clever, amoral, and dangerous. Anne's revelation as Laura's half sister clears up the coincidence of their physical similarities, but it does not lead the plot in a new direction.

Hartright, changed by his experiences and the circumstance surrounding him, shows himself to be far more than a meek drawing master. He is undeterred by the immorality he encounters, by the physical dangers he has faced, or by the threats from Fosco. What's more, he has now developed the intuition he needs to protect himself from the wily Fosco. Previously Hartright wouldn't have thought of sending a letter to Pesca. In fact, the "old" Hartright would be unlikely to investigate Fosco's crimes or attempt to become Laura's protector.

Hartright 's investigation of Fosco starts with his decision to find and follow the Count because he has never actually seen him. Hartright expects to see a monster, and is surprised by "the horrible freshness and cheerfulness and vitality of the man." Fosco, to all appearances, is a delightful fellow. He buys a tart at the bakery, and smiles at all the children he passes.

At the opera Hartright shows himself to be a connoisseur. He describes the "English" audience as applauding "without the least consideration for the orchestral movement which immediately followed it." Fosco, however, has a full appreciation for the opera. Says Hartright, "Not a note of Donizetti's delicious music was lost on him." The dark, romantic content of the opera reflects Fosco's character and the mood of the book.

At the opera, Fosco recognizes Pesca as a member of a secret society. Pesca, however, does not recognize Fosco, probably because he has grown much fatter. Later, Hartright questions Pesca about the society. Pesca explains that the purpose of the society is "the destruction of tyranny and the assertion of the rights of the people." This society may have been based on the Carbonari, a real Italian society that existed at the time. The Carbonari, like the society mentioned by Pesca, had initiation rites and a hierarchical leadership. The specifics of the society—the required tattoo, for example—may have been a romantic invention.

# The Woman in White | Part 3, Chapter 3 : The Third Epoch (The Story Continued by Isidor, Ottavio, Baldassare Fosco: The Count's Narrative) | Summary

This entire section is dedicated to the confession written by [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) at the command of Hartright. In it, Fosco describes his friendship with Percival, which is based almost entirely on their shared need for cash. Says Fosco, "We both wanted money. Immense necessity! Universal want! Is there a civilized human being who does not feel for us?" He also describes his attraction to Halcombe, which is, apparently, quite passionate. He writes, "Pass me the intoxicating familiarity of mentioning this sublime creature by her Christian name."

Fosco explains that his entire plan was born from the realization that [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick) and [Laura Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Laura_Fairlie) looked almost identical. He boasts about the minimal fuss involved in safeguarding Sir Percival's secret and gaining access to the 30 thousand pounds. Just as Hartright has surmised, he was able to switch Laura for Anne and vice versa. This resulted in precisely the outcome he had hoped for. Anne's death is described as a mild inconvenience. Laura's incarceration in an insane asylum is barely mentioned.

Toward the end of his confession, Fosco describes the errors he made along the way. First, he did not act when he discovered that Halcombe had released Laura from the asylum. Second, he allowed Hartright to escape his henchmen after Percival's death. Another error was the unfortunate death of Anne Catherick one day before Laura left Blackwater for London. Fosco notes that his inaction in the first two cases was a result of his regard for Halcombe. Anne's untimely death could not have been avoided.

Fosco ends his confession with a paragraph filled with self-congratulation and denial of any serious wrongdoing. He asks the reader, "Is my conduct worthy of any serious blame? Most emphatically, No!" He continues, "Judge me by what I might have done. How comparatively innocent! How indirectly virtuous I appear in what I really did!"

In his confession, Fosco provides his full name: Isidor Ottavio Baldassare Fosco. He also calls himself Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Brazen Crown and Perpetual Arch-Master of the Rosicrucian Masons of Mesopotamia. Of these, one is a real organization: the Rosicrucian Masons, which derived from the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Rosicrucians are an international society dedicated to studying ancient mysteries.

The Masons, or Freemasons, are also an international society with ancient rites. A sect of the Freemasons called the Rosicrucian Masons emerged at the time Fosco would have lived, and the group did exist in Italy. Mesopotamia, however, is quite a distance from Italy—and there is no suggestion that Fosco might have lived there. The Rosicrucian Masons still exist in England; they are said to study the "hidden mysteries of nature, science, and truth."

The content of Fosco's letter validates all that Hartright and Halcombe have discovered. It also confirms that Fosco was a spy, "charged with a delicate political mission from abroad." Further, it includes a mention that Fosco had studied chemistry and was able to manufacture drugs.

Moreover the letter provides the reader with a new perspective on [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco). Not only does he believe himself to be a magnanimous, if platonic, lover, he also sees himself as achieving his goals as blamelessly as possible. About his contingency plan for murdering Anne, he brags, "I should have ... extended to the captive (incurably afflicted in mind and body both) a happy release."

The reader, like Hartright, has no difficulty in seeing through Fosco's bluster. The Count describes his confession as a "remarkable narrative." Hartright more accurately calls it the "terrible story of the conspiracy told by the man who had planned and perpetrated it."

# The Woman in White | Part 3, Chapter 4 : The Third Epoch (The Story Concluded by Walter Hartright) | Summary

Having read Fosco's confession, Hartright finds the cab driver who took Fosco and Laura to Waterloo Station on July 26—the day after Laura's supposed death. The driver remembers both the journey and the name of his passenger. He is prepared to swear to both.

Hartright takes Fosco's confession and the cab driver to Mr. Kyrle, the lawyer. Kyrle is now wholly convinced of the truth of Hartright's story. Together, Hartright, Halcombe, Laura, and Kyrle confront Laura's indolent uncle, Frederick Fairlie. Mr. Fairlie, to avoid any fuss and upset, accepts Laura as his niece, as do his servants and the villagers. Hartright has Laura's name removed from the tombstone and replaced by [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick)'s.

Hartright finds more lucrative work and is offered a commission in Paris. He invites his friend Professor Pesca to join him there. While in Paris, Pesca tells Hartright that he has had a visit from a member of the Italian secret society and begs to leave immediately. Before they depart, however, Hartright desires to visit Notre Dame and on his way to the cathedral passes by the Paris morgue. There on public display, he discovers [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco), dead. He observes, "The wound that had killed him had been struck with a knife or dagger exactly over his heart." Two cuts on his upper arm obliterate his Brotherhood tattoo.

With their last enemy gone, Hartright, Halcombe, and Laura have won the day. Laura has a baby—a son they name Walter. When little Walter is six months old, Frederick Fairlie dies, and [Limmeridge House](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/symbols/" \l "Limmeridge_House) is left to Laura. Hartright, Laura, and their son move in along with Halcombe. Hartright asks Halcombe whether she wants to pursue her own interests or find a husband. Halcombe tells him, "My heart and my happiness, Walter, are with Laura and you."

The story ends with every villain punished and every hero rewarded. Even poor [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick) has what she always wanted: eternity next to her beloved Mrs. Fairlie in the graveyard at Limmeridge.

Halcombe, whose strength and independence are a major feature of the novel, chooses to forgo finding a husband and setting up an independent household. Instead, she tells her sister and brother-in-law she is looking forward to being part of their family and teaching their children. She vows, "The first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be—we can't spare our aunt!" Halcombe's decision pulls the final pieces of the story together in a satisfactory manner. It also implies that, for Halcombe, the love of a man is not important. In other words, it strengthens the possibility that Halcombe may be intended as a lesbian character.

# The Woman in White | Quotes

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**1.**

*I am, with the mighty merchant's note in my hand, as large as life, as hot as fire, and as happy as a king!*

[Professor Pesca](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Professor_Pesca), [Part 1, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-1-chapter-1-summary/)

Professor Pesca is a slightly ridiculous Italian friend of Walter Hartright's. Here he is delightedly moving the narrative forward by providing Hartright with the letter that will gain him employment at Limmeridge House.

**2.**

*There, as if ... dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary woman, dressed ... in white garments.*

[Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Walter_Hartright), [Part 1, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-1-chapter-1-summary/)

The Woman in White, Anne Catherick, plays a key role in the story. In this scene, she appears to Hartright at a crossroads by moonlight and relays mysterious references to people and places associated with his new job.

**3.**

*It will always remain my private persuasion that nature was absorbed in making cabbages when Mrs. Vesey was born.*

[Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Walter_Hartright), [Part 1, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-1-chapter-1-summary/)

Hartright, arriving at Limmeridge, humorously describes Mrs. Vesey, Laura's old governess, who is placid to the point of being nearly vegetative.

**4.**

*The woman who first gives life ... to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature.*

[Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Walter_Hartright), [Part 1, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-1-chapter-1-summary/)

Hartright describes Laura Fairlie, as for the first time he falls hopelessly in love.

**5.**

*The foreboding of some undiscoverable danger lying hid from us ... [in] the future was strong on me.*

[Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Walter_Hartright), [Part 1, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-1-chapter-1-summary/)

Collins uses the literary technique of foreshadowing many times in the novel. Although saddened that he must leave Laura, Hartright is even more distressed by foreboding for her future.

**6.**

*There are many varieties of sharp practitioners ... The hardest of all to deal with are [those] who overreach you under the disguise of inveterate good humor.*

[Mr. Gilmore](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Mr._Gilmore), [Part 1, Chapter 2](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-1-chapter-2-summary/)

Mr. Gilmore, the Fairlie family lawyer, tries to protect Laura's fortune from the scheming Sir Percival. He has difficulty, however, dealing with Mr. Merriman, Percival's deceptively friendly lawyer. Collins possibly uses the solicitor's name Merriman as a rather pointed pun.

**7.**

*If I only had the privileges of a man, I would ... tear away ... to meet the rising sun.*

[Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Marian_Halcombe), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

Throughout the book, Holcombe resents the restrictions placed on her gender and wishes that she were a man. Here she describes her desire to hasten the reunion with Laura by taking a fast horse and galloping through the night.

**8.**

*My respect for ... my own ... petticoats ... exceeds my respect for all the Elizabethan bedrooms in the kingdom.*

[Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Marian_Halcombe), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

Halcombe is a woman of common sense and intelligence. Here she declines a tour of a disused portion of Blackwater Park, since wandering the dusty rooms would ruin her clothes and provide no positive outcome.

**9.**

*The frogs were croaking, and the rats were slipping in and out of the shadowy water, like live shadows of themselves.*

[Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Marian_Halcombe), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

Collins uses highly descriptive language to create mood and develop symbols. Here, Marian describes the ominous atmosphere at the lake on the grounds of Blackwater, the location where Sir Percival and Count Fosco begin their villainous plot.

**10.**

*He would blandly kiss his white mice and twitter to his canary birds amid an assembly of English foxhunters.*

[Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Marian_Halcombe), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

Count Fosco, despite his evil nature and vast size, keeps canaries and white mice as pets. Halcombe grudgingly admires his willingness to show affection for these little animals, even at the risk of criticism from his peers.

**11.**

*English Society, Miss Halcombe, is as often the accomplice as it is the enemy of crime.*

[Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Count_Fosco), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

Count Fosco is a smooth, charming villain. Here he relates to Halcombe and Laura part of his wholly amoral philosophy of crime.

**12.**

*The pestilence that wastes, the arrow that strikes, the sea that drowns, the grave that closes over love and hope, are steps of my journey.*

[Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Walter_Hartright), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

At Blackwater Park, Halcombe has a dream about Hartright. Readers will learn that the dream has supernatural elements. The dangers Hartright describes are events he actually survives on his expedition.

**13.**

*I could draw your secret out of you, if I liked, as I draw this finger out of the palm of my hand.*

[Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Count_Fosco), [Part 2, Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-1-summary/)

Fosco is a far more dangerous man than Sir Percival, with whom he converses here. His comment refers to his skills at interrogation and also alludes to the mesmerism—or hypnotism—he exerts. He controls various individuals—particularly his wife—through his hypnotic powers.

**14.**

*Creaking shoes invariably upset me for the day.*

[Mr. Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Mr._Fairlie), [Part 2, Chapter 2](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-2-summary/)

Frederick Fairlie is a petty, self-centered hypochondriac, who places his comforts above all other considerations. Here he debates whether to receive a visitor who might have creaking shoes—despite the possible importance of the message she is bringing.

**15.**

*As the widow of a clergyman of the Church of England ... I have been taught to place the claims of truth above all other considerations.*

[Mrs. Michelson](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/characters/#Mrs._Michelson), [Part 2, Chapter 3](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/part-2-chapter-3-summary/)

Mrs. Michelson, Sir Percival's housekeeper, makes it clear that not only her religion but her place in society makes honesty of utmost importance to her.

# The Woman in White | Symbols

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## Woman in White

The woman in white is [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick), the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Catherick and Philip Fairlie ([Laura Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Laura_Fairlie)'s father). She is thus Laura's lookalike half sister, an important factor in the plot of the novel. Anne is a long-suffering character and a figure of mystery. She is also the character upon whose thoughts and actions much of the plot relies.

Anne appears for the first time in a strange and almost surreal situation: alone, garbed only in white, at a crossroads at midnight. Her virginal white garb and entire life story reflect innocence, and Anne's decision to wear white at all times comes from her association with virtuous Mrs. Fairlie. Her innocence is a result of her simple mind and inability to fully understand the villainous motives of others.

The creation of a "woman in white" is the result of a real-life event in [Collins](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/author/)'s life. A screaming woman in white actually appeared before him, running from the home of a friend's neighbor. This woman, Carol Graves, eventually became Collin's long-term mistress.

## Limmeridge House

Limmeridge House is the home of [Laura Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Laura_Fairlie) and [Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Marian_Halcombe), and the location where protagonist [Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Walter_Hartright) and Laura first discover their love for each other. Although it is the scene of some disturbing events in the story, it is also a symbol of tranquility, safety, nature, and beauty. The terrace is beautifully ornamented with a profusion of flowers. The drawing room is romantically lit and "the sweet evening scent of the flowers met us with its fragrant welcome through the open glass doors."

The characters are free to wander the grounds, and the landscape lulls the two sisters and Hartright into expressing themselves through their art and writing. The drawing room's piano also encourages the residents to display their more passionate and gentler moods.

Limmeridge House is often described in contrast to Blackwater, home of the villainous [Sir Percival Glyde](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Sir_Percival_Glyde). Blackwater, unlike Limmeridge, is hedged in by trees; even the lake on the premises is described in dark, gloomy, and even disturbing terms. While songbirds sing at Limmeridge, snakes and rats scuttle on the grounds of Blackwater.

## Insane Asylum

None of the characters in The Woman in White are actually insane, but the specter of madness hangs over the story. [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick), at the beginning of the narrative, has escaped from an asylum where, she says, she has been unjustly held captive. After her identity is stolen, Laura is confined to the same asylum. Throughout the story, the reader is kept in uncertainty as to whether Anne's stories—of Sir Percival's secret and her own incarceration—are actually true.

The insane asylum itself is described as pleasant enough; it has been carefully selected as appropriate for an upper-class woman. The significant elements of the asylum, however, are these:

* It is a place of incarceration, from which Anne and Laura are supposedly unable to escape.
* Both Anne and Laura are placed in the asylum in order to keep Sir Percival's great secret: that he is, in fact, not the heir to either a title or an estate.
* Neither Anne nor Laura have the ability to resist or even communicate with the outside world about their incarceration—Anne because of her real mental challenges and social position, and Laura because her identity has been stolen.
* In both cases, the incarceration is an example of a man abusing his power over a dependent woman.
* In both cases the women actually do escape—Anne entirely on her own, and Laura with her sister's help. In other words, neither woman needs a man to help her regain her freedom.

# The Woman in White | Themes

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## Identity

The theme of identity is explored in great depth in The Woman in White. In fact, the question of identity drives the story from beginning to end:

* The narrative starts with the appearance of a strange woman in white whose identity is discovered only near the end of the book.
* Laura's identity is explored as she is referred to by [Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick) as [Laura Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Laura_Fairlie), even after her marriage. Does she ever really become Lady Glyde, as she is given neither the power nor the status due the wife of a baronet?
* Laura's identity is literally stolen from her when Sir Percival and [Count Fosco](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Count_Fosco) substitute her for Anne Catherick and incarcerate her in an insane asylum.
* Anne's identity as Laura's half sister is finally revealed toward the end of the story, as is her right to be buried with the Fairlie family.
* Professor Pesca's full identity is revealed toward the end. Instead of being a simple professor of language, he turns out to be a member of a secret society of political assassins.
* Count Fosco, although he has been shown to be a villain throughout the story, is discovered to also be a spy.

In addition to exploring literal themes of identity, the book also examines the idea that a person's self-identification can change over time. Hartright, at the beginning of the tale, is a simple and underemployed artist: "out of health, out of spirits, and ... out of money." By the end of the story, his health and spirit are revived. He is fully employed with international art commissions. He's also the husband of a beautiful and loving woman, owner of an estate, and father of a son who carries his name. Moreover he has proven to himself that he can overcome physical and moral danger and successfully confront and destroy evil.

## Class System

In Victorian England, social status was essentially unchangeable, and social classes rarely mixed. This reality is shown throughout The Woman in White, and actually precipitates much of the plot. [Laura Fairlie](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Laura_Fairlie) and [Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Walter_Hartright) are clearly soul mates, but Hartright understands he cannot ask for Laura's hand in marriage because he is not her social equal. Laura is engaged to Sir Percival, in part, because her father was eager that she marry someone with the noble rank of baronet.

As the narrative progresses, individuals of various social levels act on the basis of their class. Mrs. Michelson is the widow of a clergyman. During her marriage she would have been looked up to in local society. Now forced into service because she lacks funds, she is a high-level servant. Michelson is more intelligent, responsible, observant, and better educated than the average servant. Housemaid Margaret Porcher, however, is a member of the lower class, as is cook Hester Pinhorn. Both are ignorant, and Hester is illiterate.

## Women's Place in Society

Women in Victorian England had extremely limited power except as provided through their husbands, fathers, or other close male relatives.

Laura, whose uncle and lawyer are unwilling or unable to come to her rescue, would be a mere pawn except for two factors. These are her wealth (which she was able to withhold for a short period) and her beauty (which gained her [Walter Hartright](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Walter_Hartright)'s love and support). Laura abdicates the power Sir Percival grants her to break their engagement. This is because she feels bound by her father's dying wish that she marry Sir Percival. In fact Sir Percival's offer was rather disingenuous. He felt sure Laura's sense of duty to her father would prevent her terminating the engagement.

[Anne Catherick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Anne_Catherick), although she has Mrs. Clements as protector, is entirely a victim of her own circumstances and a pawn in Fosco's evil game. Even her health is compromised by her difficult youth.

[Marian Halcombe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Woman-in-White/character-analysis/#Marian_Halcombe) spends much of her time lamenting an inability to control many situations or to challenge her tormentors to a physical fight. Even Marian Halcombe, although able and willing to take charge under certain circumstances, is physically and symbolically helpless to respond effectively to plots forming around her.

## Power of the Past

Many major characters are deeply impacted by events of the past that have shaped their present and will influence their future.

* Laura's decision to marry Sir Percival is based entirely on a decision made years before by her father, now deceased. Her fateful resemblance to Anne is the result of her father's adulterous affair with Mrs. Catherick.
* Sir Percival's past includes being raised by reclusive parents. He has been denied opportunities to make important social connections that could have allowed him to succeed on his own. His heinous actions, taken decades earlier, are the impetus for his later acts including his marriage, his alliance with Fosco, and his fiery death.
* Fosco's final destiny is the result of his choice, in his younger days, to join a secret society and become an assassin and spy.
* Anne's story is based on others' past actions: her father's philandering, her mother's conniving with Sir Percival, and Mrs. Fairlie's affection for the neglected child.

The story comes full circle at the end when the powers of the past wreak revenge on the guilty and reward the brave, faithful, and innocent.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Preamble and the Narrative of Walter Hartright, Chapters 1-4

The novel opens with a brief preamble explaining the purpose of the narrative: to lay out a detailed description of events that will function similarly to a legal record. In order to give the most complete account of events, the story will be told from the perspectives of different individuals who have insights into what happened. [Walter Hartright](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#walter-hartright), a twenty-eight year old art teacher, is introduced as the individual who is overseeing and compiling the various narratives, and as the character who will begin the story.

The events of the narrative begin in London, on the last day of July. It is a hot evening and Walter goes to visit his mother and sister Sarah, who live in the suburb of Hampstead. When he arrives at their house, he is greeted by his friend [Professor Pesca](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#professor-pesca). Pesca is Italian and makes a living giving Italian language lessons to wealthy London families. He and Walter had sometimes crossed paths as a result of teaching in the same houses, but their friendship was cemented when Walter saved Pesca from drowning while they were both at the seashore. Ever since then, Pesca has been devoted to Walter and has also become friends with his family. Pesca is very excited to tell Walter that he has a job opportunity for him: one of Pesca's clients was looking for recommendations for a drawing teacher, and Pesca is eager to recommend Walter for the position. The position is being advertised by [Frederick Fairlie](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#frederick-fairlie) of Limmeridge House, who is seeking to hire someone to give art lessons to two young women, and also to assess and organize an art collection. The position is a 4 month contract that pays well, and Sarah, [Mrs. Hartright](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-hartright) and Pesca all think this is a wonderful opportunity. Walter, however, is reluctant to take the position and is less than excited when his application is accepted and he is given instructions to travel immediately to Cumberland.

The night before his departure, Walter goes to Hampstead again to say good-bye to his family. Since it is a very hot night, he is in no hurry to get back to his stuffy rooms in central London, and decides to take a winding route home. As he is walking, he is shocked to feel someone touch his shoulder from behind and more shocked to turn around and encounter a woman dressed entirely in white. She asks him whether she is on the right road to get to London, but also seems very sensitive about him believing she has done something wrong. He reassures her and agrees to walk with her to a place where she will be able to get a cab. She makes him promise that when it is time for her to leave, he will not try and detain her.

As they walk, she asks Walter if he knows any baronets (a rank of nobility, like an earl or duke). Walter names the few that he does, and she is reassured that none of them are the one she is concerned about. Walter expresses worry that a baronet has harmed her in some way, but she refuses to talk about it. Walter also tells her that he is leaving London for Cumberland the next day, and she mentions that she has fond memories of Cumberland. Much to his surprise, she goes on to specifically mention Limmeridge House, the place where he will be employed. She alludes to a Mrs. Fairlie, who she loved, but who is now dead. Walter doesn't say anything about his future employment, and as soon as they reach central London she is very eager to get into a cab and hurry away. Almost as soon as she drives off, Walter overhears a conversation in which two men stop to question a police officer. The two men explain that they are looking for a woman, dressed in white, who has escaped from a mental asylum.

Walter is now worried that he may have helped a mentally ill woman to run away. However, his own plans preoccupy him and he leaves for Cumberland first thing the next morning. After an extended journey, he arrives late at night, and goes to bed without having met anyone except some of the servants.

The opening section of the novel introduces the unconventional narrative structure, and explains the justification for it. Most novels are narrated in either the first or third person, from the point of view of one or several primary characters. Here, Walter is introduced as both a central character, but also as a sort of author/editor figure. He will bring together narratives from the perspectives of many characters so as to give as complete and accurate an account as possible. This insistence on accuracy suggests several things. It works as foreshadowing to indicate that some of the novel's content may seem fantastical or unbelievable. It also suggests that it has been difficult to uncover what actually happened at certain moments and that there may be gaps, omissions, or inaccuracies.

Walter's insistence on accuracy and relying on multiple narrators seems to suggest a commitment to an objective, unbiased account of events. His comparison of the narrative to legal testimony further implies this commitment. As Lisa Surridge points out, "The text reveals the household as a forum of potential witnesses, and their narratives, letters, and documents as potential legal exhibits" (p.116). At the same time, the fact that Walter is the one putting together the story based on his investigations, interviews, and reconstructions gives him a large amount of control, and alerts a reader that his perspective might still be biased.

In this opening section, we get hints that Walter may function as the novel's hero. We learn that he is a responsible and caring provider to his mother and sister, foreshadowing an ability to take good care of women who are dependent on him. The encounter with the woman in white further highlights these chivalrous tendencies; even with a mysterious and possibly sinister figure, his first instinct is to be courteous, helpful, and try and keep her safe. Even the history of his friendship with Pesca is significant in that it includes mention of Walter having saved him from drowning. This further suggests that Walter is physically strong and competent, but also brave and honorable.

Pesca, who seems at this point to be a minor character, is significant for the way he immediately introduces a non-English presence into the novel. His colorful and flamboyant personality foreshadows the figure of the Count. The reference to Pesca nearly drowning and being rescued by Walter indicates the gap between a weak and decadent continental European culture, and an athletic, vigorous, and more traditionally masculine culture among Englishmen like Walter.

The scene in which Walter first encounters the woman in white has become one of the most famous scenes in Victorian literature. The idea of an unaccompanied woman walking alone in the middle of the night would have been particularly shocking at this time, and immediately raised suspicions that the woman was either in danger, or that she was herself dangerous in some way. Walter is torn between these same concerns, as well as an underlying sexual tension. The touch of the woman's hand is powerful not just because of the shock, but because of the way in which direct contact between a woman's body and his own would have been rare and potentially arousing. As Andrew Mangham explains, "Although it is arguable that Hartright is disturbed by meeting a possible lunatic or prostitute, his fear could also stem from his own sexualized response to the woman in white" (p. 175). It was not uncommon at the time for a rejection of social expectations to be seen as part of a symptom of madness, especially in women, so the news that the woman in white seems to have been an asylum escapee seems a plausible explanation to Walter.

The theme of social class is also raised prominently at the very start of the novel. The very fact that Walter needs to work and that he is motivated to take the job in Cumberland indicate that Walter is middle-class, and relies on work to earn an income and support himself. At the same time, the nature of his work means that he is put in contact with much wealthier families who can afford the cost of giving their daughters art lessons. The woman in white has clearly had some negative experience with an aristocratic man, although at this point she will not give any details. There is an implicit contrast between Walter, as a middle-class individual who works for an income, who takes good care of her and behaves like a true gentleman, and this (possible) other man, who may have the title of gentleman but not actually behave like one. This indicates that a criticism of class structures may go on to be a significant part of the novel.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Narrative, Chapters 5-9

When Walter gets up and goes to breakfast the next morning, his first at Limmeridge House, he is surprised to be greeted by a woman who he at first expects to find attractive when he sees her from behind. However, when she turns around he is repelled by her heavy, masculine features. The woman introduces herself as [Marian Halcombe](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#marian-halcombe), and she proceeds to explain the relationship between the individuals living at Limmeridge House. Marian and Laura Fairlie are half-sisters, and both orphans; they had the same mother. Mr. [Frederick Fairlie](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#frederick-fairlie) is Laura's paternal uncle, the younger brother of her father. He inherited the property and became Laura's guardian after her father's death. Mr. Fairlie is unmarried, and quite frail and sickly. The only companion Marian and Laura have other than each other is Laura's former governess, [Mrs. Vesey](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-vesey). It will be Walter's job to give them both art lessons.

Walter explains his encounter with the woman in white to Marian, asking her if she is any idea who the woman could be, since she seems to have known Marian and Laura's mother well. Marian has no idea who she could be, but suggests that she will try to investigate by looking through the letters her mother wrote during her lifetime. She also suggests that Walter not tell either Laura or Mr. Fairlie about the encounter, since they are both sensitive and easily agitated. Walter then has his first meeting with Mr. Frederick Fairlie. Mr. Fairlie loves to surround himself with art and beautiful things, but he is very sensitive and anxious and requires a lot of coddling. He also shows no interest in the type of instruction his nieces will receive, and Walter finds his spoiled and selfish nature to be distasteful. Walter's introduction to the household continues: Mrs. Vesey strikes him as placid and mild-mannered, but he is immediately smitten with the beauty and delicacy of Laura Fairlie.

That very evening, Marian takes him aside to share the information she has been able to gather from Mrs. Fairlie's letters. In a letter dated about 11 years prior, Mrs. Fairlie describes how one of the village women, Mrs. Kempe, was ill and dying. Mrs. Kempe's sister, Mrs. Catherick, arrived to nurse her, accompanied by her 11-year-old daughter Anne. Since Mrs. Catherick would be very preoccupied with nursing her sister, she entrusted Anne to Mrs. Fairlie's care. Anne was considered intellectually slow, but seems to have become strongly attached to Mrs. Fairlie. For example, after Mrs. Fairlie suggested that white clothes suit her, little Anne vowed to only wear white in the future. Mrs. Fairlie was also struck by a strong resemblance between Anne and her own daughter Laura. As Walter hears all of this, he realizes that the woman he encountered did look a lot like Laura Fairlie, leaving him persuaded that the woman in white must have been [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick).

After this conversation, Walter and Marian discreetly ask Laura if she remembers anything about Anne Catherick, but while she does remember briefly meeting the young girl, she has no idea what became of her after Anne and her mother left Cumberland. Meanwhile, as time passes, Walter begins to fall in love with Laura, and also becomes increasingly convinced that she shares his feelings. Three months into his contract, Marian takes him aside to tell him that she knows he is in love with Laura. She also tells him that Laura shares his feelings, but that Walter must cut off the blossoming relationship by leaving the house immediately. She makes it clear that she doesn't object to Walter's class position: her concern is rather that Laura Fairlie is already engaged.

Marian tells Walter it is important that he leaves as soon as possible, since Laura's fiancee will be arriving at the house within days. The engagement was set up by her father prior to his death, and Laura was neither happy nor unhappy about it, but Marian is concerned that her growing feelings for Walter will lead to her becoming distressed. Marian advises Walter to tell Mr. Fairlie that he is urgently required to return to London, and will therefore have to leave before the end of his contract. Walter agrees to the plan with a heavy heart, reluctant both to part from Laura and worried he will disappoint his family with his abrupt return. He also asks Marian who Laura's fiancee is, and is alarmed to learn that Laura is engaged to a man named [Sir Percival Glyde](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#sir-percival-glyde), a Baronet from Hampshire. This news is worrying to him since he recalls that Anne Catherick said she was from Hampshire, and that there seemed to be a Baronet she was afraid of.

As Walter encounters the family at Limmeridge House, questions of gender and androgyny quickly become apparent. In the Victorian era, there were clearly defined ideals of masculinity and femininity in behavior and appearance. Laura Fairlie perfectly embodies the ideal Victorian upper class woman, with her beauty, fragility, delicacy and modesty. Walter's attraction to her contrasts with his ambivalent reaction to the woman in white; Laura would never overstep any social boundary in her behavior, and he can thus embrace his attraction to her. At the same time, the strong physical likeness between the two women suggests that they might be foils to one another, and that part of what is appealing about Laura is that she represents a socially sanctioned version of the woman in white's wildness.

Marian and Frederick Fairlie, on the other hand, both strongly challenge gender expectations. Marian is androgynous both in her physical appearance and her behavior. She appears quite masculine in her features, but is also clearly intelligent, competent, and action oriented. She is immediately willing to help Walter figure out the identity of the woman in white, and does so effectively. She also sees herself and Walter as sharing a common purpose in taking care of Laura and protecting her feelings. The decision not tell Laura about Walter's encounter with the woman in white marks the first of many times that Walter and Marian will work as a team, while assuming Laura is too frail to be involved.

Mr Frederick Fairlie likewise challenges ideas of what it means to be a man. He is preoccupied with beauty and art, but to a selfish degree, and fails to live up to his obligations as a guardian of two young women and the head of a large estate. He wants to live a lazy and pampered life, and is very easily overwhelmed. Frederick functions as a kind of comedic caricature of the spoiled and lazy Victorian aristocrat, and contrasts directly with Walter's bravery, vigor, and chivalry. Since Frederick is unmarried and represented as quite effeminate, there is also the possibility of him being interpreted as a negative stereotype of a gay man.

When Marian decides to try and find out who the woman in white could be, we see the first of many investigations take place in the novel. She clearly has good skills for doing detective work, since she comes up with a plausible method for uncovering information, and is then meticulous and thorough in going through her mother's letters. This shows Marian's intelligence and ingenuity. It is also significant that written documents hold the key to identifying the woman in white as Anne Catherick. Throughout the novel, written records will often be shown as the way to either document and uncover a truth, or to conceal it.

Walter and Laura's love for one another is ill-starred for many reasons. The most obvious, and the one Walter is most aware of, is the social gap between them. Laura is wealthier and higher-ranking, and it would be considered extremely inappropriate for her to marry a non-aristocratic man. This expectation becomes ironic, however, in that both Frederick Fairlie and the mysterious Baronet do not seem to be positive figures. Marian, surprisingly and unconventionally, makes it clear that she doesn't object to Walter's social status, but that she knows the relationship will become a source of pain to Laura due to her pre-existing engagement. The engagement is important because it shows the lack of control Victorian women often had over their marriages. Laura's father wanted her to marry Percival Glyde, and now she feels obligated to do so, even though she feels no attachment to him on a personal level.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Narrative, Chapters 10-14

A short time later, Marian comes to consult with Walter. Laura has received a letter delivered by an elderly woman. The letter is anonymous and describes a dream in which Laura is marrying a man who is not named, but who is described in precise physical detail, all of which matches up with Sir Percival. The dream turns into nightmarish vision of the threat the man poses to Laura, and the letter ends with the writer cautioning Laura to investigate her fiancé's past before marrying. It also describes the letter writer as having been a close friend of her mother. Marian wants to know if Walter thinks they should start trying to find out who may have written the letter, or wait for the arrival of the family lawyer, [Mr. Gilmore](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mr-gilmore), and ask for his help.

Walter can't help wondering if uncovering information about Sir Percival might break off Laura's engagement, so he suggests that he and Marian try to find out more about the origins of the letter. They ask around the village but can't get any information. They finally arrive at the village school, where the teacher is scolding a boy named Jacob Postlewaite for claiming that he saw a ghost. Under further questioning, he claims it was the ghost of Mrs. Fairlie. The teacher explains that Jacob claims he saw a woman in white at Mrs. Fairlie's grave, and that it therefore must have been her ghost. Walter begins to suspect that who Jacob actually saw was [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick), and shares this suspicion with Marian. He then decides to watch at Mrs. Fairlie's grave overnight to see if anyone comes back.

At twilight, Walter sees two women enter the graveyard, one elderly and one young. The elderly one leaves her companion, who begins tending to Mrs. Fairlie's grave. Walter approaches her, confirming that she is the same woman in white he has met before. She is startled but reassured when he reminds her that he was kind and helpful to her before. He explains that he has been staying at Limmeridge house, and also tells her that he knows she escaped from the asylum. She becomes agitated upon hearing this, but he reassures her that he is happy to have helped. Anne explains which asylum she escaped from, and how once she got to London, she took refuge with her friend [Mrs. Clements](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-clements). Two days prior, the two women traveled to a nearby farm called Todd's Corner to stay with some of Mrs. Clement's relations.

Walter uses this opportunity to discreetly probe into whether Anne was seduced by Sir Percival, since he suspects that might have been her motive for writing the letter to Laura denouncing his character. She completely rejects this possibility, leaving him confused. He openly accuses her of having written the letter, which she tries briefly to deny. Then Walter suggests that if she will agree to meet with Laura, she can disclose whatever warnings she needs to. By now, however, Anne is becoming very agitated, especially when Walter refers to whomever put her in the asylum. When he mentions Sir Percival's name, she screams in horror and he realizes that it must have been Sir Percival who put her in the asylum. Anne's scream brings Mrs. Clements hurrying back, and the two women hurriedly depart.

Walter returns home and tells Marian what has happened. He initially proposes that Laura and Anne meet, but Marian rejects this idea. She does agree to go with Walter to the farm the following day to speak with Anne herself, and vows to get to the bottom of why Sir Percival placed Anne in an asylum and presumably paid for it. The next morning, Walter gives notice to Mr. Fairlie that he is leaving his job, and then he and Marian go to the farm. They are surprised to find that Anne and Mrs. Clements left first thing in the morning, with no explanation and in a great hurry. After questioning [Mrs. Todd](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-todd) and her daughters, it comes to light that Anne was informed of the expected arrival of Sir Percival at Limmeridge House, and Walter is convinced that this why Anne and her mother fled.

Back at the house they encounter Mr. Gilmore, the lawyer. The plan is that he will help to determine if Sir Percival is trustworthy and whether or not Laura should marry him. Mr. Gilmore sends a copy of the letter to sir Percival's lawyer, and has also sent servants out in hopes of tracking down Anne and her companion. He assumes that Anne's motive for denouncing Percival was unrequited love, and does not seem overly alarmed about the case, though he promises to investigate it faithfully. The servant reports back that he was unable to trace the two women, so there is nothing else to be done. In the meantime, Walter is preoccupied with his departure. Before he leaves, he says a heart-rending good-bye to Laura, who gives him a drawing she has made.

This section sheds light on Walter's feelings for Laura, and his motivations for pursuing the source of the letter she has received. Although he has tried to be respectful of Laura's engagement, he would be very happy to see it ended, and he is therefore very motivated to find out if there is something sinister or dangerous about Sir Percival. He is partially concerned about protecting Laura, but also hopeful that this might help his own chances of being with her. Even Marian, who is very protective of Laura, is not sure at first how seriously to take the letter, and whether it is worth investigating. In contrast to Mrs. Fairlie's letter, which seemed to create truth by identifying the woman in white, this letter is viewed by everyone with some skepticism and no one is sure how seriously to take it.

Part of why the letter is viewed with suspicion is that many characters assume it was sent by a jealous or spurned lover who is now angry that Sir Percival is going to marry someone else. Mr. Gilmore certainly sees it that way, suggesting that both his logical and pragmatic legal training, and his experience as a middle-aged man who is longer inclined to romantic ideas the way that Walter is, make him unconcerned about any real danger. While Walter is more worried that there is real danger, he too assumed in his conversation with Anne that she and Percival were having a sexual relationship, and that that is how he betrayed and damaged her. Walter is very surprised when this turns out to not have been the case.

These assumptions suggest how stereotypes about women tend to focus on them being at least partially at fault; whether or not they are sympathetic, Mr. Gilmore and Walter at first assume that Anne's motivations derive from her resentment at not being chosen by a man. Ironically, their failure to believe her story and the suspicion with which they view her account will end up placing Laura in danger. The way in which the letter is presented also undermines its credibility. Rather than describing factual events, the author writes about a dream vision. Especially for characters who look at events in a very practical and logical way, it is easy to dismiss this as simply paranoia or even madness.

Walter's encounter with Anne at the grave of Mrs. Fairlie is a classically Gothic scene that recreates the drama and tension of their first encounter. He is able to gain some new information, but is still left with many questions. The dramatic tension of the narrative builds, in that it seems increasingly likely either that Anne is insane, delusional, and lying, or that there is something truly dark and sinister in Sir Percival's past.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Mr Gilmore's Narrative

**Summary**

[Mr. Gilmore](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mr-gilmore) spends the first few days of his time at Limmeridge House quietly, noting that Laura Fairlie seems depressed. Mr. Fairlie indicates that he is in favor of the marriage between her and Sir Percival, but his main priority is to be bothered as little as possible. When Sir Percival arrives, he acknowledges that he has seen the copy of the anonymous letter, and readily offers an explanation. Mrs. Catherick (Anne's mother) had formerly been his employee, and he had always felt particularly concerned about her since her husband abandoned her, leaving her as a single mother to a child with psychological difficulties. Anne's illness eventually made it necessary for her to receive full-time care, and so Sir Percival offered to pay the cost of her being housed in a private asylum. He did so out of a charitable desire to help the Catherick family and to ensure that Anne received a good quality of care, but Anne perceived being sent to the asylum as a kind of imprisonment, and blamed him for it. Thus, she sent the angry letter in which Sir Percival was presented as a villain. He is more than happy to provide any necessary documentation to support this story, and is actively trying to find Anne so that she can be returned to the institution.

Mr. Gilmore finds this story entirely plausible and Marian says that she does too, although she appears somewhat hesitant. Sir Percival notices this hesitation, and suggests that she write to Mrs. Catherick for confirmation of this story. She reluctantly does so. Sir Percival also finds out where [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick) was staying, and says he will ask more questions in hopes that she can be located. Marian still seems dissatisfied with the conversation, and tells Mr. Gilmore that she wishes Walter were still at the house. A short time later, a very brief reply comes from Mrs. Catherick, in which she confirms everything that Sir Percival has said. Sir Percival has also told Marian that he has noticed that Laura does not seem happy, and that he is willing to break off the engagement if she tells him she wants to. Marian is concerned that Sir Percival is being manipulative, and does not want to have any responsibility in persuading Laura to marry him. When Marian explains the story behind the letter to Laura, Laura seems to accept it, but also requests time to delay making up her mind about the marriage.

Mr. Gilmore, however, is concerned about the delay; he will not be able to return to Limmeridge House in the coming months due to his other business, and this means that if Laura decides to go ahead with the engagement, he will not be able to discuss terms with her in person. In light of this, he meets with her the following morning, and while still acknowledging that the marriage may not go forward, asks her if she has reservations about the terms. Laura surprises him by asking that it be stipulated for Marian to live with her. Mr. Gilmore brushes this off and clarifies that he is interested in where she would like to see her money go. Laura suggests that she would like to leave it to Marian, and then tries to say something about someone she would like to leave a keepsake to, but gets overwhelmed by tears. Mr. Gilmore drops the subject. As he leaves, however, Mr. Gilmore comes to feel increasingly unsettled about the prospect of Laura and Percival's marriage.

Eight days after his return to London, Mr. Gilmore receives a letter notifying him that Laura has agreed to marry Sir Percival, and that they plan to marry very quickly. Marian also tells him that prior to the wedding, she and Laura will be traveling to Yorkshire to visit some friends. Mr. Gilmore then explains the financial situation relevant to the legal documents he must now draw up in preparation for the wedding. If [Frederick Fairlie](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#frederick-fairlie) dies without having children, the Limmeridge estate will be inherited by Laura. She will have access to the income from the estate during her lifetime, and could arrange her will such that her husband would have access to the income after her death. More importantly, if she has a son, he will inherit the Limmeridge Estate. This arrangement is clear and straightforward, and unlikely to present problems. When Laura turns twenty-one (which will happen a few months after her marriage) she will also be able to access twenty thousand pounds, which her father willed to her. There is also an additional ten thousand pounds the interest on which will go to Laura; upon Laura's death, this will be inherited by her aunt Eleanor.

This unusual set-up took place because Eleanor, the sister of Philip and Frederick Fairlie, married an Italian man named [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco). Philip was angry about this marriage and disinherited his sister. Even though Laura advocated for her aunt, the best she could achieve was the strange condition which made it very unlikely Eleanor would ever receive her inheritance. Eleanor unfairly blames Laura, and refuses to see her niece. The source of potential tension is the 20,000 pounds Laura will inherit when she comes of age. Mr. Gilmore wants to establish the settlement such that, should Laura die without having children, the money will be willed by her to whomever she chooses. If she has children, the money will of course go to them. During her lifetime, she will have access to the interest, as will Sir Percival for his lifetime.

Mr. Gilmore sends this proposed contract to Sir Percival's lawyer, but is countered with a request that if Laura dies without children, the 20,000 pounds will pass to her husband. Neither lawyer can come to an agreement, and Mr. Gilmore is particularly worried because he knows that Sir Percival is deeply in debt, and in fact not very well off. He writes to Mr. Fairlie, who does not want to be bothered and thinks Gilmore should just agree to the terms. Gilmore and Sir Percival's lawyer, Merriman, have a meeting and Gilmore tries to negotiate a compromise. Merriman also discloses that he is still working to find Anne, and now believes a man is involved in hiding her in London. Gilmore is still preoccupied with getting a better settlement to protect Laura, and decides to travel to Cumberland to meet with Mr. Fairlie in person.

As Gilmore is leaving for his journey, he runs into Walter in London. Walter asks if Laura will be marrying Percival, and Gilmore does not give him a straight answer. Walter also says he is hoping to get away, and asks Gilmore to let him know if he hears of any opportunities that would allow him to go abroad. Gilmore agrees to do so, and resumes his journey. However, Gilmore is not successful at persuading Mr. Fairlie to change his mind. He leaves angrily, and upon his return reluctantly draws up a settlement that he knows is unfair and disadvantageous to Laura.

**Analysis**

The switch in narrators to Mr. Gilmore allows a new tone and perspective to be introduced into the narrative. Unlike Walter, Mr. Gilmore is not biased by his own interests, and his only priority is to see Laura happy. As readers know from Walter's narrative, Gilmore is also a very logical and practical man. Therefore, Mr. Gilmore's fears about the impending marriage are quite different: he doesn't worry that some sinister Gothic secret might be threatening Laura. Rather, he worries about the financial situation that she find herself in. The lengthy details of the negotiation process and Laura's financial position make it very clear that this marriage is essentially a business transaction, and that it is being treated like one. The two lawyers represent opposing interests and both fight very hard for the best deals for their clients.

The marriage negotiations also show how little control Laura has, and how she is insufficiently protected by the man who should take care of her. While Mr. Gilmore makes an effort to find out what she wants, he does so because he cares about her, not because he is obligated to. It is also not Laura who gets to make the decision about whether or not to accept the terms that Sir Percival's lawyer proposes. Frederick, as her male guardian, gets to make this decision, and he is too lazy and incompetent to advocate for her best interests. The way in which the man who is supposed to be responsible for Laura's welfare fails to safeguard it offers a grim foreshadowing of the way in which her husband will also fail to keep her safe.

This section builds dramatic tension in that Sir Percival at first seems charming and attentive, and has a plausible explanation for everything. Still, both Marian and even eventually Mr. Gilmore cannot shake the feeling that something is not right, which raises the reader's suspicions. Ironically, the fact that Sir Percival is so eager to have his story checked out seems to make it even more suspicious. The letter from Mrs. Catherick seems like inarguable proof, and adds to the way in which written documents are assumed to offer a truthful account. Still, a reader's doubts about this letter might begin to shed light on how nothing in the novel is quite what it seems.

The history of Laura's finances does give the reader the opportunity to learn about Laura's aunt Eleanor, whose fate offers an echo of what might have happened if Laura tried to marry Walter. Eleanor's husband was wealthy and aristocratic, but because he was not English, no one approved of the marriage. As a result, Eleanor lost her financial independence as well as contact with her family. This unhappy fate shows another way in which women lacked control; even if they defied expectations to marry the man of their choice, they might suffer very much as a result of this decision.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Marian's Narrative, Part 1

**Summary**

The narrative resumes with a series of entries from Marian's diary, beginning when [Mr. Gilmore](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mr-gilmore) first left Cumberland, at which point it was unclear whether Laura would or would not marry Sir Percival. Laura has decided to tell Sir Percival that she is in love with another man, because she believes this is the honorable thing to do. Marian hesitates, but agrees to support her and be present when she speaks to Sir Percival. That night, Laura tells Percival that she will speak to him the following morning.

The next morning, Marian receives a worrying letter from Walter. Walter is clearly not persuaded by Sir Percival's explanation of the letter, and he expresses his desire to go abroad. He also says that he believes he is being followed, which makes Marian worry about his mental state. A short time later, Sir Percival comes in to meet with Marian and Laura, who assures him that everything she is going to say is entirely her own idea. She acknowledges that he has offered to release her from the engagement, and that she does not want to break it off. However, she suggests that he might want to, because she admits that she has given her heart to another. Sir Percival remains silent, and Marian begs him to speak. Laura explains that she will never pursue a relationship with the man she loves, but that she felt compelled to be honest with him. Sir Percival, surprisingly, takes her confession as evidence of her virtue, and declares that he is more determined than ever to marry her. After he leaves, Laura resigns herself to her marriage and tells Marian never to hint to Walter that she is unhappy. She does request that if she dies, Marian give him a book of drawings and lock of her hair, and tell him that she loved him.

The next day, Marian speaks to Sir Percival and suggests that it is inappropriate for him to continue with the engagement now that he knows Laura does not love him, and loves someone else. He insists that there is still hope she may grow to love him, and that since Laura will never be able to have a relationship with her unnamed lover, she may as well be married to a man who admires her and will treat her well. In the wake of the confirmed engagement, Laura is extremely passive, and unwilling to create obstacles, leading to the date of the wedding being set before the end of the year. Frustrated, Marian decides to take her to Yorkshire to visit their friends, the Arnolds. Before they leave, she hears that Walter has been given a position as part of an expedition to Honduras. He will be leaving almost immediately, and be abroad for at least six months.

After a few weeks away, which seems to prove beneficial to Laura, Marian and Laura are summoned back to Cumberland. December 23 has been proposed as a wedding day, but Laura's consent still needs to be obtained. Marian tells Laura, who says that the date is too soon, but also will refuses to allow Marian to negotiate for a later one. Marian vents her frustration, but the only condition Laura will insist on is that Marian live with them after her marriage. She also asks that Marian not tell Walter about the impending wedding. Marian agrees, but does not tell Laura about Walter having gone abroad. Increasingly worried—especially because Walter has mentioned being followed and feels sure this is connected in some way to [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick)—Marian burns his farewell letter.

Sir Percival has proposed two options for the months following the wedding: either traveling to Rome, or spending the winter in London. Marian thinks it is important they go abroad, since she hopes the warm weather will benefit Laura's health, and also that the new place will distract and entertain her. Laura is initially somewhat excited about this prospect, because she assumes Marian will be accompanying them. She is devastated when Marian explains that the only hope they have of persuading Percival to let Marian live with them permanently is to give the couple time alone during their honeymoon. However, as the time for the marriage approaches, Marian tries to focus on Percival's good points, and can't help but admit that his behavior is generally good. He continues to be anxious about the fate of Anne Catherick, and he also readily accepts the idea of Marian living with him and Laura upon their return to England. Percival also mentions that during their time in Italy, Laura will have a chance to reconcile with her aunt Eleanor, since he and [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco) are good friends. Marian's positive feelings towards Percival are, however, short-lived and she is increasingly distressed as the wedding draws closer. On December 23, Laura and Percival marry.

**Analysis**

While the previous narratives have been more objective and have relied on observations of Laura to infer that she is unhappy with the impending marriage, Marian's narrative offers a much more intimate perspective. She is closer to Laura and speaks with her much more openly. Also, as another woman, Marian can much better understand the lack of control and lack of choice that Laura faces. Marian is increasingly frustrated with the fact that Sir Percival decides to go ahead with the marriage while knowing that Laura is not happy about it. While she does not doubt Laura's virtue or honor, she thinks that Sir Percival has an obligation not to trap her into a marriage that she has admitted she doesn't want. Sir Percival makes it very clear that he does not think love is very important; he is pleased with the indication that Laura will be an honorable wife, and he doesn't really care whether she ever comes to love him or not.

The section also highlights Laura's innocence and naivety. She has always been very attached to the idea of Marian continuing to live with her and Sir Percival, which implies both that she is somewhat afraid of being alone with her future husband, and that she doesn't really understand how much her life will change once she is a married woman. While Gilmore's fears seemed to focus on Laura being financially exploited, Marian and Laura's worries seem linked to the control Sir Percival will have over her, and the sexual expectations that come with marriage. Laura's repeated pleas for the marriage to be delayed indicate the possibility that she is afraid of what will happen after the wedding. Marian sees it as her job to prepare Laura for the loss of her innocence and bitterly resents the conditions that require this. The scene the night before the wedding when Marian watches Laura sleep strongly implies that Marian associates Laura's purity and innocence with her remaining a virgin, and mourns for what will happen after a man takes a possession of her.

The wedding is interesting in that in many Victorian novels, a marriage would signal the end of the story. Clearly, though, this wedding is no "happily ever after." All of the sinister foreboding suggests there is more to come, and that dangers lie ahead for Laura. The December timing is also non-traditional; rather than a summer or spring time wedding indicating new hope, blossoming, and fertility, Laura and Percival marry at literally the darkest time of year, in cold, barren conditions. Marian has repeatedly compared the marriage to a kind of death, and there are no positive omens in the way the wedding is presented.

This section also further suggests how suspicions of madness can cause warnings to be overlooked. Walter's erratic behavior, obsession with Anne Catherick, and claims that he is being followed have made both Mr. Gilmore and now Marian fear that he is becoming mentally unhinged. As a result, Marian does not take his concerns seriously, and even burns the letter he sends to avoid documentation. It will later become clear that even though Walter is emotionally distressed, all of his fears are valid and accurate. Like Anne, he is too easily dismissed, which creates greater danger for the other characters.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Marian's Narrative, Part 2

**Summary**

The narrative resumes six months later, at the end of June. Laura and Sir Percival are about to return to England, accompanied by [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco) and his wife. Marian has already moved to Sir Percival's estate, Blackwater Park, to await their arrival. Marian knows that Walter has arrived safely in Honduras, but has not recently heard from him. No trace was ever found of [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick) and [Mrs. Clements](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-clements) and the search for them has been abandoned. [Mr. Gilmore](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mr-gilmore) has fallen ill, and as a result has had to leave his work and go abroad to recover. Mr. Fairlie is relieved to have been left to his own devices at Limmeridge House. Letters from Laura during her time abroad have been vague and non-descriptive, leaving Marian deeply unsure of what her sister's experience of marriage has been like.

Marian spends the following day exploring the gloomy estate, and is horrified when she comes across a wounded dog. Upon bringing him back to the house, a housemaid explains that it was likely shot by Baxter, the gamekeeper. When Marian seeks further explanation by questioning the housekeeper, she learns that the dog belongs to Mrs. Catherick. Mrs. Catherick visited the estate the previous day to ask about Anne, since she had heard rumors of someone resembling her daughter having been seen in the neighborhood. No one at the estate had heard anything about these rumors, though they were struck by her saying that there was no need to tell Sir Percival about her visit.

Upon Laura's return, Marian is startled to see that she is still unwilling to give any details about her marriage and relationship with Sir Percival. From what she can observe, Sir Percival seems unsettled and often suspicious. Marian has also been observing Count Fosco and his wife. She is shocked by the change in the former, who has gone from a silly and talkative woman to someone very reserved and cold. Count Fosco, by contrast, is a larger-than-life and colorful figure, who puzzles Marian, but whom she cannot help but admire, even though she also distrusts him. A short time after the return, the group is interrupted at lunch by news that [Mr. Merriman](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mr-merriman) has arrived to see Sir Percival. Percival seems distressed by this news and leaves in a hurry, at which point Fosco explains to the rest of the group that Merriman is his lawyer. This unexpected arrival seems to indicate that Merriman has very serious news to share. As the two men exit from their meeting, Marian overhears their conversation. Merriman refers to Laura's signature being obtained on a document in the presence of witnesses, within a week's time, and suggests that if this does not happen, the longest delay he could obtain on the payment of bills would be three months. Percival is quick to assure him the signature will be obtained.

Marian presumes that Sir Percival is experiencing financial problems, and needs money from Laura. She shares this news with her sister, who is unsurprised and agrees not to carelessly sign anything. Marian speculates that Count Fosco must know something about these troubles, but is also struck by how attentive and kind Sir Percival has become. The next morning, the whole group goes on an excursion to the estate grounds. During this excursion, Marian ends up revealing that Mrs. Catherick visited the house; this news agitates Sir Percival until Fosco urges him to be calm. Sir Percival hurries back to the house to question the servants, and Marian fills in the Count about all the events related to Anne and Mrs. Catherick. When they return to the house, Sir Percival is about to leave for a journey.

Before he goes, he invites his wife, the Count and Eleanor into his study to attend to a business matter. Count Fosco, however, insists that Marian serve as the second witness, since there might be ambiguity about he and his wife both being witnesses. Sir Percival directs Laura to sign a document, and when she asks what she is signing, he says in too much of a hurry to explain it. When she holds firm, he becomes increasingly angry, accusing her of mistrusting him. He becomes increasingly angry with Marian when she stands up to him, and takes Laura's side. Laura and Sir Percival argue, and she is about to leave in anger, when Marian begs her to stay on the good side of Count Fosco. Fosco gets Percival to admit that the signature could wait until tomorrow, and urges him to return to the subject after he comes back from his trip. Percival reluctantly leaves, vowing to get Laura's signature the following day.

After his departure, Laura wonders if he is going in pursuit of Anne Catherick now that he has heard there are rumors of her being in the area. She also admits to Marian how unhappy her marriage is, but declines to go in to detail. Instead, she and Marian discuss what to do now. They are convinced the document was an agreement in which Laura would agree to lend him money, and they worry about where the money would go, and what kind of responsibility she might be held to. They write to the lawyer who has taken over for Mr. Gilmore, asking for his advice, and request that he reply by special messenger so that they can get the answer in time before Sir Percival's return. As Marian mails this letter, she is distracted by Countess Eleanor, which seems suspicious and leads her to verify her letter later. It seems possible that someone has opened the letter, so she reseals it.

The evening, Marian and Laura go for a walk, and Laura shares the details of her marriage. Percival has been cruel to her from the beginning, and she has pined constantly for Walter. When Marian cautions her about being careful to conceal Walter's identity, Laura explains that Percival already knows who her beloved is. Marian is stricken with remorse for having discouraged the relationship between Walter and Laura. As the two women start to return to the house, they see a figure walking near the lake. They hurry back, thinking they are being followed, but reach the house without incident. Once there, Marian is able to account for the whereabouts of everyone from the house, leaving her confused as to who could have been outside on the grounds.

**Analysis**

The reunion of the characters at Blackwell Park, as well as the introduction of Count Fosco and the Countess, make it clear that all of Marian's worst fears about the marriage have been realized. As soon as she gets to the estate, all of the imagery suggests that this is a dark and foreboding place. Everything seems to be stagnant, decaying, and potentially dangerous. The death of the dog on Marian's first day there offers vivid symbolism of something innocent and trusting coming to a violent end, foreshadowing potential threats to both Marian and Laura. Laura's initial refusal to give any details about her marriage is more chilling than a description might have been, because it leaves the reader in suspense as to what kind of abuse she might be experiencing. The fact that the Countess, who had been a very willful and stubborn woman before her marriage, now seems completely submissive, offers a further perspective on how a domineering husband can break a woman's spirit.

The introduction of Count Fosco offers another threatening presence. At the same time, Marian cannot help but be fascinated by him. While Percival is grim and dour, Fosco is colorful and charismatic. As an emblem of the Continental European, he is very different from the English male characters, and seductive because of his exoticism. He was clearly very compelling to Eleanor Fairlie, who seems to have somewhat resembled Marian in her willfulness and non-traditional attitude. The fact that he has managed to control her and make her subservient suggests that he is just as interested in dominance as Percival is, but that he is more skillful and smooth at manipulation and trickery, rather than brute force.

This difference becomes very clear as Percival tries to force Laura to sign some sort of agreement without allowing her to know what it specifies. As Mr. Gilmore predicted and feared prior to the marriage, Percival seems intent on securing access to Laura's money. The fact that despite his large estate he is impoverished and in debt introduces a further critique of the old landed aristocracy. By this time, it was not uncommon for ancient and well-established families to have the trappings of wealth but no available cash. Percival seems to think that he can simply tell Laura what to do and she will unquestioningly obey him. However, even docile Laura is not that trusting, and she stands up for her own intellectual ability by insisting that she could understand the terms of the contract if it was explained to her.

Marian also takes on the role of Laura's champion, defending her and warning Sir Percival that Laura has legal rights. At the same time, Marian is uncomfortably aware that these warnings are hollow. As her husband, Sir Percival has almost complete control of Laura. Moreover, with Walter overseas and Mr. Gilmore now away recovering from illness, Marian and Laura have no male ally to turn to. This leaves them both in a very vulnerable position, and despite Marian's apparent strength and defiance, she knows that as a woman she is very limited in how much she will be able to protect and help Laura.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Marian's Narrative, Part 3

**Summary**

The next day, Marian is careful to intercept the delivery of the reply from the lawyer before it gets to the house. The lawyer expresses worry that what Laura is being asked to sign is a document authorizing Sir Percival to borrow a portion of her 20,000 pounds, which is risky because if he fails to pay it back, it lessens the sum that will pass to her children someday. He suggests that in order to delay, she insist on having the document reviewed by her lawyer, which would be a reasonable step to take. As she dismisses the messenger, Fosco abruptly appears and offers to escort her back to the house. They arrive just as Sir Percival is returning, and he and Fosco have a private consultation. Afterwards, Fosco announces to Marian that the idea of obtaining Laura's signature has been set aside for the time being.

Overwhelmed, Marian collapses and is subject to a series of feverish dreams about Walter. She begs him to return, and he promises that he will, and that he will emerge unthreatened from various dangers. Marian awakens when Laura comes in to tell her that she has just encountered [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick). Laura had gone back to the boathouse searching for a brooch she had dropped the night before. While there, she was greeted by a young woman dressed in white, who returns her brooch. The woman mentions having known Laura's mother and identifies herself as Anne Catherick. She knows of Laura's marriage and explains that she had been lurking in the woods the night before, trying to find an opportunity to speak with her. Anne expresses her regret that she was unable to prevent Laura's marriage, explaining that she had previously been afraid of Percival. Now, she knows that she is dying so she is no longer afraid of him, and suggests that she is considering revealing his secret to Laura. Anne seems to think that if Laura knows her husband's secret, she will have more power in the marriage.

Anne explains that her mother has long known Sir Percival's secret, and shared it with her. Percival found out that Anne knew his secret, and she implies that she suffered as a result. Laura tries to get Anne to tell her the secret, but she becomes afraid that they are being watched and flees, asking Laura to return alone the following day. Laura went straight back to the house without seeing anyone else. Marian tells Laura to keep her meeting with Anne the next day; she will secretly hide to witness their conversation. She also tells Laura that she believes that there is in fact some secret that Sir Percival is desperate to hide.

The next day, Laura goes out to the boat house, and Marian follows a short time later. Marian, however, is surprised to find no one at the boathouse, just two pairs of footprints indicating the presence of both a man and a woman. Anxious, she hurries back to the house where she learns from the house keeper that Laura returned upset and accompanied by Sir Percival, who fired her maid. Marian goes to Laura's room to hear what happened but a servant prevents her from entering the room, saying she has been forbidden by Sir Percival to let her in. Angrily, she goes and confronts him. Surprisingly, [Eleanor Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#eleanor-fosco) also takes her side, and backed by [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco), she is allowed to go in and see Laura.

Laura explains that when she arrived at the boathouse, no one was waiting for her. She eventually noticed that there was a letter hidden for her from Anne. The letter told her that Anne had been sighted by a tall, fat man who tried to chase. She was able to avoid him, but did not dare to come back to meet her a second time. Laura and Marian realize that Anne's suspicions were right and that Laura and Anne were watched by Count Fosco, who then reported back to Sir Percival. Laura had barely finished reading the letter at the boathouse when Percival appeared. He knew about her meeting with Anne, and he had also already read the letter, which he takes away from her. Percival then demanded to know what Anne had told her, and Laura repeated the conversation but Percival insisted that she was hiding something. In order to try and force information out of Laura, he fires her maid and forbids her from seeing Marian.

Marian and Laura are now desperate and afraid. Marian writes to both the lawyer and to Mr. Fairlie, and has the maid [Fanny](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#fanny) convey the letters when she leaves the house, since they can trust no one else. Marian is increasingly anxious about the role of Count Fosco and Eleanor as spies and informants for Sir Percival. Knowing that Fosco and Percival are going to discuss their plans in the library, she sneaks out, crawls across the rooftop and hides where she will be able to eavesdrop on their conversation. She is shocked to hear Fosco inform Percival that she has written the lawyer again, especially since she took such care to safeguard the secrecy of the letters. Fosco also confirms that both he and Percival are in debt, and in need of money. Since they have not been able to secure Laura's signature for the loan, they have extended their credit for three months. Percival explains that he has no hope of getting money, but that if Laura were to die childless, he would inherit her twenty thousand pounds.

Fosco seems interested in this possibility, although Percival warns him not to pursue it, especially since Fosco also stands to gain by Eleanor receiving her inheritance in the case of Laura's death. Fosco also attempts to pry into what secret Anne Catherick might know about Percival, but does not get any information. Percival does explain that his position is dangerous, since he is convinced Anne has shared the secret with Laura. He is also worried because he knows that Laura is in love with Walter. Because of Walter's encounters with Anne, he assumes that Walter and Laura both have access to the secret, and have sufficient motive to use it against him so that they can be together. Percival knows he can control Mrs. Catherick, but is desperate to find Anne, which Fosco promises to help him do. Percival notes the strong physical resemblance between Anne and Laura. Fosco promises that he will come up with a scheme that will resolve both the problem of safeguarding the secret, and solving their money troubles.

When the conversation ends, Marian sneaks back to her room undetected. However, the time outside in the rain has chilled her, and she falls into a fever. The narrative ends with an entry inserted by Count Fosco, revealing that after she fell ill, he read her diary, and now plans to use the information found within it as part of his plan.

**Analysis**

Marian's dream vision introduces a supernatural element, which is somewhat surprising considering that Marian has thus far been presented as a very rational and logical character. The dream aligns her with the dream vision described by Anne Catherick in her letter to Laura, suggesting that while Marian can participate in the kind of masculine investigations of truth that are linked to uncovering facts, she also has access to a more feminine, intuitive, and perhaps even psychic knowledge. Alongside the information which is conveyed in the dream, it makes it clear that psychologically Marian feels incapable of protecting Laura, and wishes she had a male figure to help her. Considering how empowered she often seems to be, this expression of vulnerability offers a balance, perhaps serving to remind Victorian readers that Marian is not completely violating the expectations of her gendered identity.

Indeed this entire final section of Marian's narrative reveals a tension between her strength and fierce devotion, and the fact that she is still vulnerable to the bodily weakness often associated with women. She falls ill twice, and the second time this illness is particularly disastrous since it leaves her incapacitated and allows Fosco to access and read her journal. As will later become clear, it is also Marian's illness that makes it possible for Fosco and Percival to enact their scheme. However, the illness comes after Marian performs a remarkable feat of climbing out of her window and crawling across the roof in order to be able to eavesdrop on the two men. Particularly for an upper-class woman who would be expected to be very controlled an modest in her physical activity, this is a daring and dangerous move. Marian explicitly comments on how she has to change her clothes in order to be able to do so, because the garments she would usually wear physically constrict her and make this kind of task impossible.

The eavesdropping scene is necessitated by the explicit introduction of some sort of secret which haunts Sir Percival. While Anne has up until this point seemed incredibly vulnerable due to her poverty, gender, and possible mental instability, it becomes clear in this section that she does have a kind of power. Sir Percival is actually afraid of her and what might happen if the secret got out, and while this endangers her, it also gives her a new agency. Now that Anne believes her death is imminent, she is also no longer afraid of being killed or returned to the asylum, so she poses a greater danger to Percival.

Percival's fear and the way in which he is at the mercy of female characters is also apparent when he learns that his wife has spoken with Anne, and becomes convinced that Laura must now also know his secret. On one hand, this false belief puts Laura in greater danger as he begins to isolate her, but it also makes her an actual threat rather than a passive object of abuse. With this sense of threat looming over him, as well as the ongoing financial troubles, Percival becomes more and more desperate.

The conversation between Fosco and Percival is thus extremely dark and foreboding, in that it raises the very real threat that they might conspire to kill Laura in order to access her fortune and ensure she never reveals the secret. In a reversal of previous approaches, Fosco seems more open to this possibility, while Percival cannot bring himself to condone outright murder. This contrast suggests the fundamental divide between the two: Fosco is more dangerous because his appearance is more deceptive, and he is the more truly ruthless of the two. Percival is also particularly troubled by what role Walter might play in all of this. His opinion of women is sufficiently low that he cannot really believe Laura capable of much harm on her own, but he worries about what could be achieved if she is assisted by a man.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Mr. Fairlie's Narrative and the Housekeeper's Narrative

**Summary**

[Frederick Fairlie](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#frederick-fairlie)'s narrative begins with him complaining about being inconvenienced by being asked to think back to his memories of this time period. He recalls having been interrupted by the news that [Fanny](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#fanny) has arrived bearing a letter from Marian. When she speaks with him, Fanny explains that after receiving the letters from Marian at the inn, she was surprised by the arrival of the Countess Eleanor. The Countess insisted on making tea for Fanny, and after Fanny drank some, she fainted. She awoke to find herself alone, and while she still had the letters, they appeared to have been opened and read. Fanny has nonetheless sent the one letter on to the lawyer, and now delivered the other to Frederick herself.

Upon reading the letter, Frederick is hesitant to interfere. He does not want to get caught up in a conflict between Laura and her husband, and he replies to Marian suggesting that she first come and see him alone so that they can discuss the situation. Three days after sending this reply, Frederick receives word from the lawyer that he has received an envelope addressed from Marian but containing only a blank piece of paper. He is concerned as to what this could mean, but Frederick simply tells him to mind his own business and not worry about it. Six days later, Frederick receives a visit from [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco), who reports that Marian is seriously ill. Fosco confirms that the marriage between Laura and Percival is very unhappy, and he thinks it would be best for Laura to return to Limmeridge House as soon as possible. Since Marian's illness made it impossible for her to come and urge this course of action, Fosco has taken it upon himself to come in her place. He has also worked out the details of her travel, proposing that Laura will travel from Blackwater Park to London, stay there overnight with him and Eleanor at their rented house, and then continue the second half of the journey the following day. Frederick is sick of listening to Fosco, so he writes a note inviting Laura to come and stay with him. He thinks it is impossible she will accept this invitation, because she will not want to leave Marian alone during her illness.

The narrative is then continued by Mrs. Michelson, the housekeeper at Blackwater Park. She describes Marian falling ill with fever, and the doctor being consulted. She, Laura, and the Countess work together to nurse her but Marian gets steadily worse. After a few days, Count Fosco explains that Eleanor will be travelling to London and returning with another woman to help with the nursing. The new nurse is named [Mrs. Rubelle](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-rubelle) and Dr. Dawson does not approve of her, but is frustrated to find that Percival does not support him. Count Fosco plants seeds of doubt about the doctor's competence, but after a few days, he departs for London. During his absence, Marian takes a turn for the worse. With this news, Fosco returns from London, having also arranged for a different doctor, whom he believes to be better qualified. The second doctor confirms Fosco's opinion that Marian is suffering from typhus and that her disease is thus both dangerous and contagious.

Marian does eventually begin to recover, but by this point, Laura herself is on the verge of illness due to exhaustion and stress. Dr. Dawson is also so fed up with the Count that he resigns from the case now that Marian is out of serious danger. Mrs. Michelson is somewhat alarmed that Fosco and Percival do not replace him with another doctor, and also that they do not tell Laura that the doctor is no longer present. She is further shocked when Percival announces that he, Marian, and Laura will be leaving Blackwater as soon as possible, and that he wants all the servants dismissed within the next twenty four hours. Mrs Michelson carries out the orders, and the following day, only she, [Margaret Porcher](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#margaret-porcher) and the gardener remain.

Percival and Fosco then consult her again, explaining that Laura and Marian will be spending the autumn at Limmeridge House, but that first they will travel to the seaside town of Torquay. The two men need someone to go there and find appropriate lodgings for the ladies, and they would like to send Mrs. Michelson. She is very surprised by this request, but reluctantly agrees to go. She is not successful at finding lodgings that meet their criteria, and returns three days later. Upon her return, she learns that the Count and Countess have moved to London. When she and Laura together go to see Marian, they are both shocked to be told that Marian has gone to London with Fosco and Eleanor, and plans to travel on from there to Limmeridge House. Laura cannot believe that Marian would have left without telling her, and becomes more and more anxious to go after her. Percival agrees, telling her that she can leave the next day, and stop in London along the way. Laura becomes agitated at the prospect of going to Fosco's house in London, but Percival is firm.

When they are left alone, Laura explains to the housekeeper that she when she gets to London, she plans to evade the Count and stay with [Mrs. Vesey](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-vesey), her former governess, instead. Mrs. Michelson sends the letter from Laura to Mrs. Vesey alerting her to Laura's impending arrival. The next day, Percival explains the arrangements for Laura to get to the train station, since he doesn't plan to be at the house when she departs. After seeing Laura off on the train to London, where the Count is expecting to meet her, Mrs. Michelson returns to the house. She is shocked to find Mrs. Rubelle at the house, and even more shocked to learn from her that Marian is also still at Blackwater Park. Mrs. Michelson immediately resigns. Percival tells her that she can leave whenever she wants, but since he plans to leave the following day and Mrs Rubelle is also leaving, Marian will be left alone. Concerned about her fragile health, Mrs. Michelson agrees to stay on with her, especially since she gets him to agree to rehire Dr. Dawson. Mrs. Rubelle leaves immediately, and that night while Mrs. Michelson is tending to Marian, she is startled to hear Percival swearing wildly, and then rushing out of the house in the middle of the night. Mrs. Michelson stays on to nurse Marian back to health, alluding to events that will be covered in the narrative of others. When Marian is recovered, she travels to Limmeridge House and Mrs. Michelson goes to stay with relatives in London.

**Analysis**

While the narratives up until this point have been dominated by central characters, the novel now enters into a stretch of shorter narratives told by more minor characters. Mr. Fairlie's account is particularly interesting in that it highlights the retrospective nature of these accounts. He makes it clear that he is being asked to recall events long after they took place, and that he finds that inconvenient and stressful. While a reader is unlikely to be sympathetic to Frederick Fairlie's whining, and his selfish focus on how all these events present an inconvenience to him, the reminder that characters are recalling the events at a later time, and that their accounts might not always be entirely accurate, has an unsettling effect on the narrative, making the reader unsure of what is true and what is not.

Frederick Fairlie's narrative also reveals how his selfishness makes him easy to manipulate, and how he again completely fails to safeguard the well-being of his niece. He has a snobby disdain towards Fanny because she is a servant, and is too preoccupied with his disdain to take her seriously. He does not want to get caught up in any marital quarrels and despite warning signs that something seems seriously wrong at Blackwater Park, he refuses to interfere. This attitude is in a sense emblematic of a more widespread Victorian notion that domestic matters should be kept extremely private, and that no one should interfere with what is happening between a husband and a wife. This perspective could leave women like Laura in serious danger. Fairlie is not only lazy, he is also weak, and readily gives in to Fosco's charm and manipulation. It seems very suspicious that Fosco would insist on this letter of invitation, but Fairlie just wants to get back to his luxurious idleness. Once Fairlie writes the note, there is another written document that Fosco and Percival can potentially use as part of their scheme and to bolster their credibility.

The narrative from Mrs. Michelson also reflects the way in which gullibility and class prejudice make it easier for Fosco and Percival to carry out their scheme. Mrs. Michelson is very concerned about her social respectability and talks repeatedly about her husband's position, and the status she once held. Her desire to please her employer and to be well regarded outweigh the nagging sense that something is not right. She repeatedly carries out instructions that seem bizarre, sinister, and potentially dangerous to Laura, but her regard for Percival as someone in a position of power is such that she does not challenge him.

Despite this obedience, Mrs. Michelson is an ambivalent character since she does become increasingly worried that Laura is in danger, and does eventually involve herself in Laura's plan to evade Count Fosco when she arrives in London. When Mrs. Michelson learns that both she and Laura have been deceived about Marian's whereabouts, she also resigns, since she does not want any part in whatever Percival is doing. Her affection for Marian and fears of what would happen if no one is there to nurse her, however, entrap her into staying longer. Like other characters, Mrs. Michelson knows something is wrong, but also does not feel like she has many options to do anything about it.

Laura's vulnerability is particularly highlighted in this section. While readers do not yet know what happened to her after she got to London, Mrs. Michelson's allusion to helping Marian cope with the bad news she received signals some unfortunate fate. Once Marian is ill and incapacitated, Laura has no one to help or advise her. She is not physically strong enough to cope with the stress of what is happening, and while she senses something is wrong with the plan for her to go to London, she cannot come up with an effective way to resist it. The threatening and foreboding that comes with her isolation shows just how little recourse she had to try and ask for help.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of the Cook and Others' Narratives and Walter's Resumed Narrative, Part 1

**Summary**

The narrative is resumed by [Hester Pinhorn](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#hester-pinhorn), a woman hired to work as a cook at the Count and Countess's London home. While employed there, she learns that the Countess's niece, Laura, will be coming to stay with them. Almost immediately after her arrival, Laura falls into a fit of convulsions, leading Hester to fetch a doctor. The doctor diagnoses a problem with Laura's heart, and expresses his doubts about whether she will live. Nonetheless, Laura seems much better the following day, but then takes a sudden turn for the worse and is declared dead by the doctor. He offers to register the death himself, since he is uncertain whether the Count will understand the logistics of how to do so. Eleanor handles the arrangements for Laura's funeral and burial with her mother in Cumberland. Corroborating documentation is provided by the doctor, and by [Jane Gould](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#jane-gould), who prepared the body for burial. Laura's death is recorded on her tombstone as having occurred on July 28, 1850.

The narrative is then picked up by Walter, who explains how he left Central America in the summer of 1850, and after escaping from a shipwreck arrived back in England in October. He immediately returns to London and goes to see his mother and sister, who break the news of Laura's death to him. Devastated, Walter decides to travel to Cumberland to visit her grave. While mourning there, he is surprised by two women. He recognizes the first as Marian but cannot identify the second until she lifts her veil and he realizes it is Laura herself. Walter's narrative then skips a week ahead, resuming with him living in a cheap rented house in London. Laura and Marian live on the floor below, having been passed off as his sisters. He documents what he was told by them of the intervening events.

Marian was told of Laura's departure by the housekeeper, and news of Laura's death followed a short time later. This upset Marian so much that it was weeks before she was able to travel. At that point, she and Mrs. Michelson went to London together and parted ways there. Marian went straight to the lawyer (finally named as Mr. Kyrle) to declare her suspicions about Laura's death at [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco)'s house. He started an investigation, finding the Count very helpful and cooperative. All the information seems validated by the doctor and servants, so the investigation is abandoned. Marian has by now returned to Limmeridge house, where she learns more details from [Frederick Fairlie](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#frederick-fairlie).

Count Fosco had stayed at Limmeridge House to arrange Laura's funeral and while there, had explained to Frederick that [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick) had been apprehended and returned to the asylum. She is now experiencing the delusion that her real identity is Lady Glyde, and Frederick is warned that if he is ever contacted by someone claiming to be Lady Glyde, he should ignore it. Meanwhile, Marian's investigations of Fosco and [Mrs. Rubelle](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-rubelle) have yielded nothing. All this time, Percival has been living in Paris, showing no interest in his wife's death. By October, Marian has decided to go to the asylum and visit Anne. She journeys to London, and by explaining her connection to the Glyde family is able to obtain permission to visit Anne. Marian talks with the owner of the asylum, who reveals that since Anne was returned to him in July by Count Fosco, she has seemed somehow different.

Marian is completely overwhelmed when, upon going with a nurse to see Anne, she immediately recognizes Laura. Thinking quickly, Marian promises to rescue her sister and bribes the nurse to have a private meeting with her the next day. Marian explains that Anne (Laura) has been wrongfully placed in the asylum and offers a large sum of money in exchange for helping her to escape. The nurse cooperates, and also agrees to say that she has heard Anne talking about returning to Hampshire, so that the pursuit will head in the wrong direction when her escape is discovered. Laura and Marian are able to leave immediately for Limmeridge House.

As they travel, Laura explains what happened after she left Blackwater Park. She arrived in London and was met by Fosco, who took her to an obscure house, reassuring her that Marian was there waiting for her. While Laura waited, two other men came in and introduced themselves as Fosco's friends. She seems to have been drugged, because her recollections after that are very fragmented. She believes she did in fact go to [Mrs. Vesey](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-vesey)'s and stayed there for the night, being attended by Mrs. Rubelle. The next day, she somehow left and the next thing she remembers is waking up at the asylum and being referred to as Anne Catherick. She remained there from July until Marian's arrival in October, and any of her claims of being Lady Glyde were dismissed as mad delusions.

When the two women return to Limmeridge House and Marian explains to Frederick what happened, he thinks she has been tricked by Anne. Even when Marian brings Laura into his presence, he claims not to know her. The servants are also unwilling to defend her identity. It is also dangerous for them to remain there, since the search for Anne will eventually extend to the neighborhood. They decide to flee back to the anonymity of London, and as they are passing by the grave yard, they happen to catch sight of Walter, and the three are reunited.

**Analysis**

While the conclusion of Mrs. Michelson's narrative indicated that something bad had happened to Laura after she went to London, it is the series of short narratives from minor characters that fill in the rest. Given Laura's fragility and ill health at Blackwater Park, it seems plausible that she succumbed to illness very quickly after arriving at Count Fosco's home in London. The construction of this series of events relies on stories being corroborated by several individuals, including medical experts. The inclusion of the death certificate and of the engraving on the tombstone play with the theme of written documents corroborating truth, which has been present throughout the novel. These seem like official records that no one could ever question and which offer an incontestable narrative about Laura's fate.

Yet, in the novel's most dramatic moment, a grief-stricken Walter sees Laura appear at her own grave. This moment has been foreshadowed by both the initial appearance of the woman in white, and then Anne Catherick's appearance at the same graveyard, but is still incredibly shocking to a reader who has been convinced that Laura is dead. Like other moments in the novel, the power comes from the possibility that something supernatural might be taking place, followed by an explanation that, though rational, is actually even more shocking.

This section also marks a return to Walter as the narrator, who will remain the dominant voice for the rest of the novel. Even the explanation of the events that Marian and Laura experienced after Laura's supposed death, which took place while Walter was still absent, are mediated through his perspective. Readers hear his version of what Marian tells him of this time, not Marian's own version. Given the existing confusion, mistakes, and lack of clarity in the previous narratives, it seems more logical to have a single narrator recounting events, while also opening the door to potential bias and unreliability. Walter's return to narrative control also signals the reappearance of a heroic male figure who will take on the task of protecting Marian and Laura for the remainder of the story. Marian will assist him, but he will be the primary driver of strategies and plans. Ann Gaylin summarizes this perspective when she writes that, "Although Marian and Walter appear to contribute equally to solving the mystery, Walter ultimately controls what is told to whom" (Gaylin p. 129).

This structure and change of narration partially overshadows the power and impact of what Marian was actually able to achieve. Despite everything seeming clear-cut and straight forward, she refused to abandon her suspicions about the circumstances around Laura's death and tirelessly investigated until she uncovered the truth. Tellingly, when Marian realizes that Laura is in the asylum, she knows she cannot ask anyone for help. By this point, it is clear that virtually everyone else involved has proved either incompetent, untrustworthy, or both, and Marian will have to take action herself. Her one ally is a woman working at the asylum, meaning that while the detail can be lost since Walter is the one telling the story, Laura's actual rescue and salvation is accomplished entirely be female allies. This lack of support is driven home most cruelly when Laura and Marian seek out their uncle and he performs his most significant act of neglect and betrayal by claiming not to recognize Laura. The two women are now completely on their own, and thus Walter can step in as a new source of patriarchal protection.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Resumed Narrative, Part 2

**Summary**

Upon hearing this story, Walter realizes that Fosco and Percival have deliberately switched Anne and Laura so they can get the money that would be transferred to them in the instance of Laura's death. Anxious to ensure their safety, Walter chooses a house in a poor neighborhood in East London, and finds work doing cheap illustrations. He and Marian invest the money they have in order to fund further investigations. They know it will be very difficult to prove Laura's identity, since her suffering has made her look even more like Anne. Her mind and memory are also quite unstable, so it's unreliable to ask her to prove her knowledge of only things Laura could know. They decide they will have to restore her identity without her assistance and begin by gathering as much information as they can in order to present it to Mr. Kyrle. They are disturbed when, upon asking [Mrs. Vesey](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-vesey) if Laura ever stayed with her in London, Mrs. Vesey confirms that she did not. This means that Laura's mistakes and confusion could compromise the credibility of their story. They are able to gather statements from Mrs. Michelson, the doctor, the cook, and the woman who prepared the body. Armed with this information, Walter goes to meet with the lawyer. He is anxious because he knows that Sir Percival may have returned to England upon hearing of Laura's escape, and that Percival would immediately be suspicious of him.

Walter explains everything to Kyrle, who tells him that he has no legal case. The only way there might be cause to pursue a case would be if it could be proven that there is a discrepancy between the date of death on the certificate and the date of Laura's journey to London, but neither Laura nor the housekeeper have been able to remember the exact date she left. Walter wonders if he can force Fosco and Percival to confirm this date, even though they have the most to gain by concealing it. He is determined to prove her identity. Before he leaves, Walter is given a letter to deliver to Marian, and finds out from Kyrle that Percival has returned to England. As he leaves, Walter is certain he is being watched by two men, and he makes sure to lose them before returning home.

When he returns home and delivers the letter to Marian, it turns out to be from [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco). He tells her that as long as she and Laura stay hidden and secret, they will be safe. He warns her not to let Walter or anyone else persuade her to try and bring Laura's identity to light. This letter only angers them further, and Walter announces that the next day he will go to Blackwater, since he is determined to prove that she could not have died on the day stated on the certificate, since she did not leave Blackwater until after that date. He plans to try and prove this both by questioning Dr. Dawson, and by finding out what inn Percival stayed at when he left Blackwater. If neither of these strategies work, he plans to uncover the secret and then blackmail Percival into revealing the deception.

Walter goes first to Dr. Dawson, but he only has records of when he returned to treat Marian, not of how much time elapsed between then and Laura's departure. The inn where Sir Percival is known to have stayed on the night of his departure has closed down. With no other options, Walter decides to go to Blackwater Park and try to question the gardener. Neither the gardener nor the servants can shed any light on the date of Percival's departure, and Walter encounters another man who he believes is there to spy on him. Walter now turns his hopes to finding [Mrs. Clements](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-clements), and he sets this plan in motion by writing to Ms. Todd to ask if she has been in contact with Mrs. Clements. He also investigates Percival's background, learning that he was the only son of a baronet who made many enemies in the area around Blackwater Park, and lived mostly abroad as a result. Percival mostly grew up on the Continent; he returned to England after his father's death, and became good friends with Laura's father, Mr. Philip Fairlie, around this time. The friendship between the two men was what led to the engagement between Laura and Percival.

The answer from [Mrs. Todd](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-todd) informs them that Mrs. Clements did write to her after Anne's disappearance, wondering if Anne might have made her way back to the neighborhood. Mrs. Clements also provided a contact address in London, and Walter immediately heads there. He introduces himself and reminds her that he helped Anne to escape from the asylum. Mrs. Clements asks if he has news about Anne, and he is careful to say that he is not hopeful about her safety, and that right now his priority is to bring to justice the men who may have harmed her. She is willing to tell him whatever she can, and Walter learns further information from her. After they fled Todd's Corner, Anne and Mrs. Clements returned to London and then from there moved to the remote town of Grimsby, where Mrs. Clements had family connections. Anne refused to return to her mother, since she feared Percival would find her there. While at Grimsby, Anne began to show signs of illness and was diagnosed with a serious heart condition.

Mrs. Clements tells Walter that when Anne learned that Percival has gotten married, she became obsessed with the idea of speaking to his wife. Mrs. Clements reluctantly agreed to go with her to Cumberland. In order to avoid being detected, they stayed at a nearby village. Anne made her illness worse by walking back and forth from the village and Blackwater Park, and eventually became confined to her bed. In order to soothe her, Mrs. Clements went to meet Laura and bring her back to the village, but she met Fosco instead. Fosco said he had a message from Laura: that Mrs. Clements and Anne should return to London, and tell her their address so that she could meet them there with greater safety. Mrs. Clements explained that Anne was too sick to travel, and that she was afraid to consult a doctor, lest it gave away their identities. Fosco offered to look at Anne himself, and he and Mrs. Clements returned to the cottage, where he prepared some medication for Anne. This helped her to regain some strength, and within a week Fosco had accompanied them to the train station and helped them return to London. Once there, Mrs. Clements wrote to Laura with their address, as Fosco had instructed. About two weeks later, while Mrs. Clements was distracted, Anne vanished from the house. Mrs. Clements looked for her at the asylum, and at the home of Mrs. Catherick, but gave up when Anne could not be located at either place.

**Analysis**

Once Laura, Marian and Walter are safe in London, they are faced with a strange dilemma. So long as they keep their location secret, there is no imminent threat to them, and as the letter from Fosco seems to indicate, as long as they don't try to bring the scheme to light, Fosco has no interest in tracking them down. While it would require them to live in poverty, there's no real reason why they can't simply continue in their current situation indefinitely. In fact, this new set up offers some advantages in that all three of them get along well, and Marian and Laura can now actually enjoy more independence than they did while living as upper-class ladies. It is therefore somewhat striking that Walter becomes so obsessed with re-establishing Laura's identity. While it is easy to see why he would want justice served, and to know that Fosco and Percival did not get away with their crime, there's no evidence that he ever asks Laura what she wants, and whether it is important for her to have her identity re-established.

This section, in fact, makes it clear that Marian and Walter are making all the decisions and essentially treating Laura as a child. To be fair, the impact of her ordeal does seem to have left her mentally unbalanced, and she cannot advocate for herself at this point. While on one hand confirming Laura's feminine fragility and suggesting that she is not intellectually capable of the clear memory and accuracy that allow Marian and Walter to serve as good detectives, this response works to unsettle the dichotomy between madness and sanity. As both Anne and Walter have already demonstrated, a perfectly sane person can show signs of becoming unhinged if subjected to enough trauma. The irony that it is Laura's being declared mad that makes her start to actually lose her grip on her mental faculties raises some troubling questions about other individuals who may be wrongfully committed but then over time come to be, to all appearances, "actually" mad.

By now, Marian and Laura have repeatedly been let down by structures and individuals that seemed designed to help them, and now it is Walter's turn for this experience. He assumes that because a crime has been committed, the first step is to appeal for legal assistance, and he is horrified to learn that the law will not be able to help him. The limitation of the legal system is its reliance on clearly documented evidence, and as the novel has shown over and over, evidence can be missing, inadequate, or deliberately misleading. Walter and Marian know the truth, but need to find some way to support it with evidence, otherwise it can be dismissed as simply a story. Walter will have to function as a kind of independent investigator.

Walter's initial investigation does shed further light on the active role Fosco played in the plot, and in his charismatic and manipulative ability to get people to trust him. Mrs. Clements made it very easy for him to gain access to Anne, which led to him abducting her. While Mrs. Clements is far more benevolent and well-intentioned than many other characters, she has also not been able to protect Anne despite loving her like a daughter.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Resumed Narrative, Part 3

**Summary**

Walter's conversation with [Mrs. Clements](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-clements) gives him the opportunity to learn more about Anne's history. Mrs. Clements first met Mr. and Mrs. Catherick when she moved to Old Welmingham after her marriage. Mr. Catherick was the parish clerk and before her marriage, Mrs. Catherick had been a lady's maid in a wealthy family. As a result, she was somewhat proud, and disrespectful to her husband, and Mrs. Clements took a dislike to her. A few months after their arrival, and shortly before Mrs. Catherick was due to give birth, Sir Percival arrived in the neighborhood. Mr. Catherick confided to Mrs. Clements that he had discovered valuable items in his wife's room, which must have been given to her by someone wealthy. This discovery, plus rumors of her meeting Sir Percival privately, left Mr. Catherick concerned that his wife may have had an affair and married him only once she found out she was pregnant. Mrs. Clements told him to do nothing immediately, and to try to find out more information.

Two days later, Mr. Catherick caught his wife and Sir Percival whispering together, flew into a rage, and attacked Sir Percival. He lost the fight, and disappeared from the village that very night, ashamed and angry. Sir Percival also left quickly, but Mrs. Catherick defiantly stayed on, insisting that she was a faithful wife who had done nothing wrong. She refused her husband's offer of an allowance, so it is not clear where her income comes from, though Mrs. Clements suspects that Sir Percival supports her financially. Walter is puzzled, because he does not see how the possibility of Sir Percival being Anne's father could be the secret—it had already been public enough to cause a scandal. He also wonders why Mrs. Catherick would stay in the village knowing that her reputation was ruined.

Walter is able to feel certain that Anne's father was not Mr. Catherick, as the dates of the pregnancy and wedding do not align. According to Mrs. Clements, Anne did not resemble either Percival or her mother, which makes him wonder if another man could be the father. He learns that prior to her marriage, Mrs. Catherick worked in the household of a man named Major Donthorne. Mrs. Clements also explains that she frequently cared for Anne during her childhood, since Mrs. Catherick often seemed to despise her, although she would occasionally display periods of stronger interest. When Anne was around 10, she and her mother went to Limmeridge House, during which time Mrs. Clements lost her husband. When they came back, Mrs. Clements wanted to move to London and asked if Anne could come with her. Mrs. Catherick did not allow it, and after Mrs. Clements moved away, she did not see Anne again until Anne escaped from the madhouse.

Mrs. Clements has also heard about the secret from Anne, but never learned what it was. She suspects Anne may not have actually known it either, which is an idea Walter has also started to suspect. Before he leaves, he tells Mrs. Clements that Anne has died, but that she was well taken care of and given a good funeral. He also asks for Mrs. Catherick's address so that he can visit her, despite Mrs. Clements warning him not to do so. Within a few days, Walter has gone to meet Mrs. Catherick and tells her that Anne is dead. Mrs. Catherick shows very little interest or reaction, so Walter explains that Anne's death has caused distress for someone else due to the interference of Sir Percival.

Walter explains that he knows something suspicious about the time when Sir Percival was interacting with her before Anne's birth, and that he wants her to give him any information that will help bring him to justice. Mrs. Catherick angrily defends how hard she has worked to restore her reputation after the scandal, and refuses to help him, even though she doesn't deny that Sir Percival is also her enemy. Walter makes it clear that he doesn't believe she and Sir Percival had an affair, but Mrs. Catherick stubbornly refuses to tell him anything. He decides to go to the church in Old Wilmingham where they had been caught meeting, since she seemed to have a strong reaction to him knowing the specifics of the place.

**Analysis**

Walter's investigations reach back not just into the events surrounding the scheme, but over decades. The information about Percival's history with Mrs. Catherick offers one possible answer to the secret: that Percival is Anne's father. However, Walter finds this answer unsatisfying and the fact that he does so sheds light on the gendered and social dynamics of the era. While it was certainly somewhat scandalous, it was by no means unheard of for wealthy titled men like Sir Percival to occasionally father illegitimate children, especially with working-class women. Typically the father would provide financial support in exchange for discretion on the part of the mother, and such an event would be unlikely to have serious consequences for his life. As Walter immediately notes, it doesn't make sense that Percival would be particularly distressed at the news of an illegitimate child coming to light, because this would not ruin his life the way he seems to think that the secret would.

For Mrs. Catherick, however, the impact of the scandal was very different. Walter's second clue that there must be more to the story is the fact that Mrs. Catherick chose to keep living in the same town. Walter knows that as a woman implicated in adultery and premarital sex, her reputation would have been ruined and she would have been shunned by the community. He accepts without question the way in which the same events would have had such a different impact on a man and a woman.

While Walter has not yet learned the nature of the secret, he has come to suspect that Anne may not have actually known it either. Mrs. Clements shares the same perspective. This idea is interesting because it suggests that Anne was both more cunning, and yet also more unaware, than we had thought. She was able to successfully give the impression of having knowledge she didn't actually possess, but she did so so successfully that she put herself in danger. Had Sir Percival thought of her as a harmless idiot, he would have had no reason to be afraid of her, and would not have tried to imprison her in the asylum. This paranoia about women knowing secrets they don't actually know had already come to light when he became obsessed with the idea of Laura having learned the secret. It seems that Percival, despite the power that his class and gender give him, is terrified by the idea of being undermined by a woman.

Walter's visit with Mrs. Catherick gives the strongest example of someone failing to protect an individual under their care. Mrs. Catherick and Anne are one of the few parent-child pairings presented in the novel, and this would seem to suggest that Mrs. Catherick would care most strongly about protecting her daughter. Yet, she is completely cold and does not seem even to care that Anne is dead. Especially given how much Victorians emphasized the bond between mother and child, this scene would have been horrifying and chilling. For Mrs. Catherick, Anne has always been simply a reminder of her mistake and an unwanted burden. She is traumatized by the ostracism she faced when the scandal took place, and she devoted all of her energy to restoring her reputation and being considered respectable again. She was eventually successful at this, but it left her with no energy to love her own child.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Resumed Narrative, Part 4

**Summary**

After leaving Mrs. Catherick's house, Walter realizes he has been followed by one of the spies, planted there to wait for him to come to question Anne's mother. Nonetheless, he decides to continue with his plan of visiting the church, especially since he is intrigued by a sarcastic comment Mrs. Catherick made about Sir Percival's mother. Walter intends to look at look at the marriage register to see what her name and family background were. He perseveres in doing so, even though he suspects that more spies observe his approach to the church, and likely convey the progress of his investigation to Sir Percival. However, the visit to the registry does not at first seem to be fruitful. Walter is able to find an unremarkable record of the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde to a Cecilia Elster a year before Sir Percival's birth.

Walter sets off for another meeting he hopes will reveal information, but along the walk he gets into a minor scuffle with the two men who have been following him. He is arrested and will be held for three days; Walter knows that this gives Percival time to cover up whatever information he might be getting closer to finding. The one person in the area who might be able to vouch for him is Dr. Dawson, to whom he has been introduced by Marian. The Doctor posts his bail, and Walter is freed, giving him a few precious hours in which Sir Percival will not be watching for him. Walter goes to inspect the duplicate copy of the marriage register, held off site. He is astonished to discover that this version contains no record of the marriage of Sir Percival's parents, revealing that Sir Percival must have forged the entry in the church copy so as to disguise his illegitimacy.

Walter knows that he will need both copies for comparison to prove the forgery, so he is in a haste to get back to the church. He hurries along the road, evades another attack, and arrives to find the church clerk distressed because he cannot locate the keys to the vestry. The clerk and Walter hurry to the church, having been alerted by a local boy that someone seems to be inside the church and preparing to start a fire. When they get closer, they see that the church is already on fire and that Sir Percival has gotten trapped inside due to the faulty lock. Walter organizes some desperate efforts to try and save him, but Sir Percival dies in the fire.

Reassured that Laura and Marian are safe in London, Walter stays on to be questioned about the strange events. He does not reveal his own knowledge about why Sir Percival was in the church, but offers his assumed timeline to readers. Walter suspects that when Sir Percival learned that Walter was free on bail, he became desperate. He ordered the attack, and also stole the keys and snuck in to the church in order to remove the page with the forgery so that Walter would have no proof. Once in the office, he locked the door in case anyone else tried to come in, not knowing about the faulty lock, and then accidentally started a fire with the lantern he was using.

While waiting around as part of the investigation, Walter receives a letter from Mrs. Catherick, thanking him for having pushed Sir Percival to the actions that led to his death. She explains that when she met Sir Percival while pregnant with Anne he bribed her with gifts and flattery into giving him access to the church registry office. Unbeknownst to Sir Percival, she spied to see what he did with this access, and once she found out that he had committed forgery, she used this information as blackmail for more presents. Sir Percival also gave her more details about why he is committing the forgery. His parents could not marry because his mother was legally married already, but had run away when her first husband abused her. While Percival was a child abroad, everyone assumed his parents were married, and when his father died, there was no reason anyone would be suspicious when Percival returned and claimed his estate. However, in order to borrow money, additional documents (including the marriage certificate) were required, and this would have to be substantiated with a church record of the marriage. Thus, after obtaining access to the church office, Sir Percival inserted the record of his parents' marriage at an appropriate date.

Mrs. Catherick initially did not think Sir Percival was doing anything terribly wrong, and was happy with the gifts. When she realized her husband believed they were having an affair, however, she asked Percival to save her reputation by telling him they were not. Percival refused, because the idea of an affair made it less likely anyone would ever uncover the real secret, and this scandal wouldn't really affect him, even though it would ruin her. Mrs. Catherick became very angry and threatened to expose him, but Sir Percival revealed that she was now an accomplice to his crime, and that if he was prosecuted, she would be as well. He is, however, willing to provide her with an income as long as she keeps the secret, and stays in the town, where he can keep an eye on her. Abandoned by her husband and feeling she has no other options, Mrs. Catherick agreed.

Mrs. Catherick goes on to explain that she never liked her daughter, but found the presence of the child useful in gaining public sympathy and gradually rebuilding her reputation. One day, after the time at Limmeridge, Mrs. Catherick was frustrated with Sir Percival having refused a request and angrily alluded to the fact that she could ruin him, without realizing that Anne had overheard. A few days later when Percival came to visit, he made Anne angry and she repeated the comment about ruining him, making it seem as though she also knew the secret. Sir Percival flew into a panic at the idea that Anne might know his secret, since he could not control her the way he controls her mother, and insisted on sending her to the asylum. Mrs. Catherick did not particularly object, since it would make her life easier; thus, the two of them had Anne declared insane and sent away. Since then, Mrs. Catherick has never been too worried, since despite Anne liking to refer to the secret, she has never known the truth about Sir Percival's illegitimacy. She also warns Walter not to continue investigating Anne's paternity, which leads him to believe there is still a further secret remaining there.

**Analysis**

After such a long build-up, Sir Percival's secret is somewhat surprising because of how relatively benign it is. It is certainly not his fault that he was born illegitimately, and while the forgery was a very serious crime, it didn't actually hurt anyone. Walter's own decision not to publicize his knowledge of why Sir Percival was in the church, as well as his efforts to save Sir Percival's life, suggest that he is also somewhat unmoved by what he finally discovered about Sir Percival's past. The nature of his crime is interesting given the novel's thematic preoccupation with documents and written records. As has been seen in other cases, Sir Percival changes a written record to reflect a falsehood, assuming that no one will question the authority of the document. In fact, the plan works so well that Walter is not even suspicious when he first sees the marriage record. The tampering with the document also raises questions about legality and the reliance on law. The record being included or not does not change the relationship between Sir Percival's parents, or his genetic heritage. The crime reveals the fragility of the law, and the fact that the entire course of someone's life depends on a simple notation.

Despite these anti-climatic elements, Sir Percival has engaged in many villainous activities to cover up his crime, and his death offers a convenient kind of poetic justice. He is desperately trying to erase evidence of his crime and ends up causing his own death. This satisfies a reader's desire to see the villain punished, but it conveniently prevents Walter from having to kill him directly. In fact, Walter's heroic attempts to try and save Sir Percival's life further vindicate his integrity and sense of honor. Readers can both see the bad character punished, but also know that Walter remains a good and honorable man.

The anti-climatic effect is furthered by the confirmation of Walter's suspicion: [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick) never actually knew Percival's secret. In a sense, this makes most of the plot a tragic mistake that could have all been avoided with greater knowledge. Anne was actually powerless, but Percival's anxiety that she might be able to undermine him led him to destroy her. Because he knew he was living a lie, and that everything he had could be taken away at any moment, he became increasingly paranoid and obsessed with controlling anyone who might have knowledge of his true history.

The admission that Percival and Mrs. Catherick conspired to have Anne put in an asylum when they knew she was sane represents chilling confirmation of how individuals, especially women, who are perceived as burdens or threats could be cast away in Victorian England. It also makes it clear that the protections supposedly in place for vulnerable people like both Anne and Laura was inadequate. If the individuals who were supposed to care for them failed to do so, institutional structures were not going to safeguard their welfare.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Resumed Narrative, Part 5

**Summary**

Walter returns to London, having learned that Marian and Laura were obliged to move houses in his absence. He decides not to reveal what he has learned about Sir Percival, since the rightful heir has now come into the property anyways, and none of this helps with reestablishing Laura's identity. He is dismayed to learn from Marian that while he was away, Marian was visited by [Count Fosco](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#count-fosco). She managed to conceal the visit from Laura. Fosco arrived with the owner of the asylum, and summoned Marian to meet with him. He explained that he had known where they were living for awhile, but had no interest in persecuting them so long as all secrets remained concealed. However, now that Sir Percival is dead, Fosco has become concerned that Walter will start investigating him. To prevent this, he brought the asylum owner to the house, planning to reveal Laura as his runaway patient, and assuming that the results would occupy Walter and leave him no time to investigate Fosco. However, at the last minute, he aborted the plan because of his admiration for Marian and his worries of how devastated she would be to lose her sister. Fosco does warn Marian that Walter should be very careful about deciding whether he wants to continue his investigations, because he, Fosco, will stop at nothing to protect himself.

Marian decided they had to move, and without telling Laura why, found them new lodgings. Walter reassures her that he doesn't think Fosco would be able to do much about putting Laura back in the asylum at this point, and also proclaims that he will not be frightened away, and will persist in championing Laura's cause. They break the news of Sir Percival's death to Laura, and settle down to wait for the moment to be right to continue with their plans. Walter has evidence that Fosco is not planning to leave England any time soon, so he knows that he has time. He also digs deeper into the mystery of Anne's father and uncovers the truth. During the time that Mrs. Catherick was working as a maid, Mr. Philip Fairlie (Laura's father, and a notorious womanizer) regularly visited the house where she worked. He was Anne's father, and this explains the striking resemblance between Anne and Laura.

A few months later, with Laura growing stronger, Walter asks Marian about the possibility of proposing to Laura. He suggests that being his wife will give her more legal protections, and make him better able to advocate for her. Marian readily agrees, and he and Laura marry only days later. Although his marriage makes Walter more conscious of the risks he is taking, he is still determined to bring Fosco to justice, and begins investigating him. Based on what he knows of the Count's skills and correspondence, he begins to believe that Fosco is a spy. In order to understand more, he reaches out to his Italian friend, [Professor Pesca](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#professor-pesca). After following Fosco one afternoon, and determining that he plans to attend the opera that evening, Walter and Pesca secure tickets to the same performance.

While there, Walter sees the two Italians look at each other, and realizes that the sight of Pesca terrifies Fosco. After the performance, he questions Pesca asking if he knows of any reason why Fosco would be afraid of him. Pesca reluctantly confides that he is a member of a secret Italian political society; he moved to England at their request, and awaits orders to return at any moment. The members do not know the identities of any other members, and are sworn to secrecy at the expense of their life. They are all branded with a secret mark. If someone betrays the brotherhood, he is eventually hunted down and killed. From this explanation and Fosco's reaction, Walter infers that he has betrayed the society and believed that Pesca may have been sent to kill him.

Walter realizes that Fosco is probably going to flee London as soon as possible. He prepares a letter for Pesca to read in the event of his death, and then goes to Fosco's house that very night. He confronts Fosco, who is on the verge of shooting him, but warns that if he is harmed, Pesca will come after him. Fosco reluctantly agrees to listen to Walter's demands: Walter asks for a signed confession, and proof of the date on which Laura departed from Blackwater Park. Fosco says he will provide both those things, so long as Walter allows him and the Countess to leave London and does not pursue them. Walter hesitates, but then agrees to these conditions. Under Walter's supervision, the Count writes his confession, produces a letter from Sir Percival that explicitly refers to the date of Laura's departure, and then leaves with the Countess.

**Analysis**

With Percival dead, Fosco is the only threat that remains, and he seems willing to maintain a truce. He has no particular interest in persecuting the trio, although the visit makes it chillingly clear that he could very easily harm them in some way if he wanted to. His bizarre declaration of affection for Marian also helps to explain why he would be happy to leave things at the status quo. Especially now that Percival is dead, and Walter and Laura can marry, there is an even stronger case for not pursuing the investigation and antagonizing Fosco. Yet Walter remains stubbornly determined to see Laura's identity restored, even though he knows that Fosco is an extremely dangerous enemy.

The death of Percival is presented as less significant for ensuring Laura's safety than for ending her bond with a man she despised. Given that it would not have been possible for her to annul or divorce, Percival's death frees her to marry a man she actually loves and someday have a family. Walter and Laura's marriage is presented somewhat strangely. Ever since being reunited with her, Walter has carefully maintained a brotherly relationship with her, but now that she is widowed his attitude towards her shifts rapidly. He seeks out Marian's permission, acknowledging Marian's role as a sort of guardian to her sister, and also that he views Marian as a kind of masculine equal. At the same time, he presents the marriage as being rooted in his desire to have the legal status as Laura's guardian and protector, not his obvious love for her. Thus, even in her second marriage, terms and conditions are negotiated without Laura's consent and part of the motive is control and power.

Walter's marriage makes him even more determined to secure Laura's identity and he is prepared to risk his life by confronting Fosco. Once again, a written document, this time in the form of a warning to Pesca to initiate pursuit, safeguards Walter and allows him to reach an agreement. True to form, Fosco carefully negotiates an agreement that ensures his protection. The evidence necessary to verify who Laura truly is relies on written statements and documentation; these function as the form of testimony and evidence that will be reliable enough to withstand legal scrutiny. Yet given how many times documents have been proven false and unreliable, it seems ironic that it is finally documents that bring the entire ordeal to a close.

Fosco's participation in the secret Italian brotherhood complements his exoticized identity and suggests that his weakness has been his belief that he could outwit everyone. He has not taken seriously what it means to betray the brotherhood, and the very organization that taught him how to be an adept and slippery spy and manipulator finally outwits him in the end.

# The Woman in White Summary and Analysis of Walter's Resumed Narrative, Part 6

The narrative resumes with the insertion of Fosco's confession. He proclaims his love for Marian, and explains his role in events. When he and Sir Percival were living together at Blackwater, it quickly became clear that they both needed money. Fosco also learns that some sort of secret threatens Percival, and that it seems that [Anne Catherick](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#anne-catherick) is in possession of this secret. When he learns of the resemblance between Anne and Laura, he hatches a plan to switch their identities, trapping Laura in the asylum, and giving Percival access to her fortune. By keeping watch, Fosco eventually runs into [Mrs. Clements](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#mrs-clements), who innocently leads him back to Anne. Fosco uses his knowledge of chemistry to give Anne drugs to make her appear as though she has regained strength, and encourages Mrs. Clements to take her to London as soon as possible. Although Mrs. Clements has agreed to send her address to Lady Glyde, Fosco has her followed and spied upon by the Countess to ensure that he knows her whereabouts.

Next, Fosco secures lodgings in London and visits Mr. Fairlie to get the letter encouraging Laura to come and see him. Fosco also works with Sir Percival to get everyone out of the house except for the one loyal maidservant, and Madame Rubelle. In the middle of night, while Marian is sleeping, they move her into one of the obscure bedrooms in an unused part of the house, where she is tended to by Madame Rubelle. The next day, Fosco and the countess leave, with the letter from Mr. Fairlie given to Percival, ready to be used to induce Laura to travel to Limmeridge House. Fosco and his wife now travel to Mrs. Clement's s house, where the latter is distracted by the countess. Once she has left Anne unattended, Anne is lured out by a message that she has been invited to spend the day with Lady Glyde. In the cab, Fosco charms Anne, but once she arrives at his house and finds herself alone with him and the Countess, she becomes so agitated that she goes in to convulsions.

Fosco immediately sends for a doctor, but is worried that Anne will die before Laura arrives. He tries to expedite the plans for Laura's arrival, but Anne does indeed die abruptly on July 28, before Laura's arrival. This is especially problematic because the doctor, trying to be helpful, has already recorded the death of the woman he believes to be Lady Glyde. With no other choice, Fosco goes to the station to meet Laura, bringing with him the clothes Anne had worn when he abducted her. He reassures Laura with news of Marian, and takes her to his supposed home, which is actually the home of Mr. Rubelle. He has her examined by two doctors, who declare her insane, and then keeps her sedated until he can transport her to the asylum. He has switched her clothes so that she arrives dressed like Anne, and is taken into custody. Meanwhile, the death of "Lady Glyde" is made public, and she is taken away for burial. Fosco ends his confession by explaining that the countess went along with all the schemes because of the high expectation of loyalty and support placed on English wives. He admits that if Anne had not died at the convenient time, he would have killed her himself, but insists that he has not done anything seriously wrong because he in fact went to great pains to avoid simply murdering Laura outright.

Having finished reading the confession, Walter leaves the house and goes to the cab company that had been hired to drive Laura and Fosco from the train station, where he secures further evidence confirming the date of her arrival. The next day, Laura, Marian, Walter and lawyer Kyrle all travel to Cumberland where Walter meets with [Frederick Fairlie](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white/study-guide/character-list#frederick-fairlie), confronting him with all the evidence. Mr. Fairlie finally concedes that Laura is his niece, and still alive. Walter makes a simplified version of the conspiracy public so that Laura's identity can be re-established and has the inscription on the grave changed.

A short time later, Walter travels to France on art-related business, accompanied by Pesca. While they are there, Pesca receives news that seems to distress him, and he asks to go back to London as soon as possible. Before they depart, Walter decides to do some sight-seeing and while passing by the Paris morgue, he hears talk of the body of a very fat man with a strange mark on his arm. He goes inside, and confirms that the body is that of Fosco, who was tracked down by the Brotherhood and killed. Walter confirms that since Fosco's death, the countess has been living near Paris and honoring his memory.

The following winter, Laura gives birth to a son. When the infant is six months old, Walter returns from a short business trip to learn that Frederick Fairlie has died abruptly. Laura and Walter's son is now the heir of the estate and with Marian, who has remained living with them, the family looks forward to a happy and prosperous future.

**Analysis**

Fosco's confession is necessary to finally give a complete account of the conspiracy from start to finish. It fills in any lingering questions and makes it clear just how meticulous the plot was. Even with the serious complication of Anne's untimely death, Fosco is able to cover all the tracks. It is almost impossible not to admire the complexity and cohesion of the plot, which corresponds to the ambivalence Fosco has always inspired. He is both despicable in his amorality and alluring in his brilliance.

Fosco's inglorious death thus might almost be met with regret. With the confession in hand and him having fled England, he does not seem to pose any threat. His death serves as a reminder of the dangers of being too proud and of the fact that in the end he was not as all-powerful as he believed. The grotesque spectacle of his body being displayed at the Paris morgue serves an embarrassing and undignified end for such a proud and brilliant man, showing him finally humbled. Fosco's death again combines the satisfaction of a villain being punished for his crimes with Walter being innocent of any violence or bloodshed.

With all of the evidence in hand, Frederick Fairlie comes around to acknowledging who Laura truly is. He does so more out of his exhaustion than any true conviction, showing that he is ultimately still weak and selfish. The presence of Walter as Laura's husband, who now has the legal right to advocate for her and pursue her claims, also seems like it might be an influencing factor. Ironically, Laura's triumph is presented as more of a victory won by Walter, and to a lesser degree, Marian. The change of the inscription on the tombstone marks the final time a written document is corrected to reflect the truth. At last, Anne Catherick will have the peace and respect that she could never find in life.

The conclusion marks the triumph of a new era and a potential set of new values. In contrast with Laura's marriage to Percival, her marriage to Walter quickly leads to the birth of a healthy son. This furthers a reading of Walter as bringing a healthy virility that the aristocratic males of the novel (none of whom father children) do not possess. Not only do Laura and Walter have a son, ensuring future generations, but that infant quickly becomes the heir to Limmeridge House when Frederick Fairlie dies. This signals that the era of the decadent, effeminate aristocrat is passing away in order to be replaced with men who distinguish themselves with their intelligence, courage and integrity. Although not a gentleman by birth, Walter has proven himself the true gentleman of the novel over and over again. Lyn Pykett agrees that "when the three return to Limmeridge House at the end of the novel, they can be seen as replacing an outmoded aristocratic world" (p.104).

Finally, while the happily married couple and their child seems like a very traditional ending, Marian's presence offers an unconventional twist on the family structure. It is very clear that she is extremely important to both Walter and Laura, and that she is an integral part of their family. She offers a balance of masculine and feminine qualities that complements both of them, and together the three individuals look forward to a long and happy life; according to Carolyn Devers, "providing a masculine companion for Walter and a feminine one for Laura, Marian is a full partner in this marriage of three" (p. 115).

# The Woman in White Symbols, Allegory and Motifs

## Frederick Fairlie’s art collection (symbol)

Mr. Fairlie is the owner of a vast art collection. He is surrounded by expensive art pieces and spares no money in acquiring new ones. However, the owner of this huge art collection is an invalid who cannot stand any mental exertion or external stimuli. He spends his days shut away in his private quarters and is incapable of any productive activity. It is rather ironic that a person with rapidly declining physical and mental health should display such zeal and vigor in acquiring ornamental objects. Frederick Fairlie’s art collection is a symbol of his self-absorbed character and his distorted values. He neglects the important things in life and focuses all of his energy upon these useless ornaments. Furthermore, he does not acquire art pieces out of a professional interest in art, but rather to use his collection as a means of flaunting his wealth and status. The acquisition of material things is the sole purpose of his life. Apart from this, he displays little interest in the events unfolding around him, and he shows little concern for the welfare of his nieces. The Fairlie household becomes almost dysfunctional under his guardianship. His art collection is a symbol of his selfishness, vanity and greed. His art collection fails to surround him with an artistic aura; it only emphasizes his self-absorbed and obnoxious character.

## Anne Catherick's white dress (symbol)

Anne Catherick prefers to dress entirely in white clothes whenever possible. She does so to honor the memory of Mrs. Fairlie, who told her that she looks nice in white. The white dress symbolizes her purity and innocence; throughout the novel, Anne is repeatedly victimized even though she has done nothing wrong, and it is even finally revealed that she never even knew Percival's secret. Emotionally and mentally, Anne is childish, in both her innocence and the way she clings to the memory of Mrs. Fairlie. The white dress also symbolizes Anne's enigmatic nature. Especially at the start of the novel, it is not clear what her history is, and whether she might be sinister or not. In fact, Anne's white garments in her mysterious first encounter with Walter even suggest that she might be some sort of supernatural figure.

## Blackwater Park (symbol)

The setting of Blackwater Park is very significant. The house is an ancient mansion with five hundred years of history behind it. The house is surrounded by thick foliage which casts long shadows and blocks the view. The lake of Blackwater Park is shallow, still, and devoid of life. The old mansion, the thick foliage, the long shadows and the still water produce a threatening atmosphere charged with a sense of deadened suffocation. The threatening atmosphere of Blackwater Park is symbolic to the plot. Not only does the place house two criminals, but it is also in this place that the most evil scheme will be plotted against Laura Fairlie. The suffocating foliage symbolizes the imprisonment that the sisters will endure at this place. The threatening appearance of Blackwater Park provides the perfect backdrop for the conspiracy which will take place here.

## Count Fosco’s mice (motif)

Count Fosco’s mice are frequently mentioned in the book. Count Fosco has a penchant for pets, especially mice. He treats his mice as his best friends and allows them to crawl over his body. Fosco’s fondness for mice serves to heighten his eccentricity. By repeatedly describing Fosco’s playing with his mice, Marian seeks to set him apart from no-nonsense Englishmen and to emphasize his foreignness. Fosco’s fondness for mice, his exuberant manners and his Napoleonic features turn him into an exotic spectacle. The frequent mentioning of his mice serves to remind the readers of his foreign origins and exotic manners. Fosco’s foreignness may both inspire mistrust and curiosity among the readers. It is important for the readers to focus their attention on Fosco, for he is the most fascinating male character of the novel, and will play a decisive role in shaping the development of the plot.

## Count Fosco (allegory)

Count Fosco is an allegory for continental European culture. In Victorian Britain, people liked to cherish the belief that the continental Europeans are culturally sophisticated but morally decadent. On the other hand, the Victorians believe that English people possess plainer taste, but are more virtuous and upright in their character. Count Fosco’s person is a living allegory of what the Victorians believed to be the European culture. Fosco is culturally sophisticated. He is well versed in arts and masters many languages. He is well travelled and boasts a broad experience in many matters and subjects. The Victorians believed the Europeans to be more decadent in their lifestyle than the English. Fosco has extravagant taste. His fine taste in clothes is portrayed through his expensive and highly decorative waistcoats. Fosco also stands for the image of the scheming and morally corrupt European. He engages in the practices of spying, lying, conspiring and poisoning: all secretive behaviors despised by Victorian Englishmen. By inventing this sophisticated, exuberant and dangerous character, the author creates a convincing allegory for what the Victorians believed to be continental European culture. Fosco embodies all the classic Victorian stereotypes of the European man.

# The Woman in White Metaphors and Similes

## Our words are giants when they do us injury and dwarfs when they do us a service (p. 101) (Metaphor)

Walter uses this metaphor to describe the impact that language can have. He compares words to something large and powerful (giants) and to something small and usually considered weak (a dwarf), introducing an element of paradox into the metaphor as well. Walter is frustrated by the fact that he cannot use language to do what he wants, such as accurately describe Laura's beauty, but he also knows how powerful and harmful language could be if he were to use it to make an inappropriate declaration. Throughout the novel, language will be shown to be incredibly powerful in some ways (Percival's whole life, for example, rests on the words documenting the marriage of his parents) but also ineffectual in others (no one believes Laura saying who she is until she can support it with evidence). The gist of the metaphor is that words often matter most when they lie or "do injury," and matter least when they are truthful and well-intentioned.

## "The last word went like a bullet to my heart" (p. 110) (Simile)

This simile is used to describe how Walter feels when he first learns that Laura is engaged. The simile comparing this news to a bullet piercing his heart describes the intense pain this information caused him. The simile also suggests death, which is what would happen if a bullet struck someone's heart. This is appropriate because the news marks the death of Walter's hopes and also of his interactions with Laura, and his time at Limmeridge House. Finally the simile is appropriate because it alludes to the threat of violence that will come to be associated with Laura's marriage.

## Her eyes dilated in the dim evening like the eyes of a wild animal (p. 138) (Simile)

Walter uses this simile to describe Anne's reaction when he first questions her about the person responsible for having her committed to the asylum. The simile simultaneously conveys both her aggression and vulnerability. At this point in the novel, Anne's history is very hazy, and it is unknown to what degree the claims of her being mentally unstable are accurate. When she reacts with extreme, animalistic violence at the allusion to the man who tormented her, it seems possible that she could be insane, dangerous, or both. However, the comparison to an animal also implies that because she is less rational and logical, she is also potentially vulnerable and subject to being hunted and trapped.

## Drop by drop, I poured the profaning bitterness of this world's wisdom into that pure heart (p. 212) (Metaphor)

Marian uses this metaphor to describe the effect of explaining to Laura that it would be inappropriate and unacceptable for Marian to join Laura and Percival on their honeymoon. This information, which is new and surprising to Laura, is compared to a kind of bitter and possibly poisonous fluid being gradually poured into a receptacle. The metaphor reinforces the way Laura is a passive vessel with little agency of her own, and also the way in which Marian is often put in difficult positions of breaking difficult news to Laura. The fact that this information and expectations about married life have to be conveyed slowly suggests how torturous the process is for Marian. The metaphor, by comparing the knowledge of what married life will be like to a liquid that slowly penetrates Laura's innocent body also contains a subtle sexual allusion. Part of what Marian might explain to Laura in this scene may include reference to what sexual activities she will be expected to engage in after her marriage.

## She is always[...]as cold as a statue and as impenetrable as the stone out of which it is cut (p. 239) (Simile)

Marian uses this simile to describe Eleanor, Count Fosco's wife. Comparing Eleanor to a non-living object highlights how passive she is, and how much she seems to be controlled and manipulated by her husband. The idea of a statue that has been formed into a particular shape also references the way the countess has been moulded by her husband's desires and wishes.

# The Woman in White Irony

## Count Fosco's death (situational irony)

Count Fosco's death in Paris is an example of situational irony in that he avoids punishment for his participation in the scheme against Laura, only to then be killed in retribution for his betrayal of the Italian brotherhood. His punishment does not come in the form that a reader would expect it to. This irony shows Fosco meeting a violent end but does not implicate any of the major characters in this death. The irony is important because it suggests that the crimes of villainous characters will eventually catch up with them, even when it seems like they have gotten away with everything. The irony of Fosco being killed in revenge, but not by anyone related to Laura Fairlie, also keeps the violence linked to Continental, European characters, reinforcing the theme that the British characters are more rational and humane.

## Walter and Percival's social positions (situational irony)

The contrasting social positions of Walter and Sir Percival at the start of the novel create an example of situational irony. Walter is a member of the middle class who has to work to earn a living and who does not own any property. Sir Percival seems to be wealthy, sophisticated, and the owner of a large estate. On the surface, it would seem like Walter is the suitor who might pose the risk of marrying Laura for her money because he has so much less income than she does. It turns out, however, that Percival, the man who seems to be far wealthier, is the one who is scheming and plotting to get his hands on Laura's fortune. Walter, on the other hand, loves Laura faithfully even when she has no income or social position in the second half of the novel. This irony offers a critique of the upper-class preoccupation with gaining as much money as possible.

## Sir Percival’s death (dramatic irony)

Sir Percival's death functions as an example of dramatic irony. He believes that he can protect his secret by destroying the relevant portion of the marriage register. However, the outcome of what he hopes to achieve and what the reader ends up observing are very different, and in fact directly contradict one another. Sir Percival thinks he is going to save his reputation and his wealth, but he ends up losing his life. This irony shows that a preoccupation with maintaining social status and position can lead to destructive outcomes. It is also ironic that while the reader has expected it might be Anne Catherick or Laura who will die so that the secret can be concealed, it ends up being Percival himself who pays the price to protect his secret.

## Mrs. Catherick's scandal (dramatic)

Jane Catherick's scandal is an example of dramatic irony because readers are aware that she is indeed guilty of a sexual transgression, but also that it is not the one most people think she is guilty of. Mrs. Catherick was seen having an intimate conversation with Sir Percival when she was a young woman. Her husband and everyone in her neighborhood falsely believed Percival to be Jane’s lover. Percival perpetuated this false belief because it helped to protect his own secret. However, Mrs. Catherick's scandalous secret is actually that she slept with Philip Fairlie and then hastily married Mr. Catherick to cover up her illegitimate pregnancy. Despite Jane Catherick's clever attempts to cover up her previous sexual transgression, she ends up being socially condemned for an affair she is not guilty of. This irony suggests that characters will always end up having to pay a price for social transgressions, in one way or another.

## Count Fosco's foreign features

The appearance of the arch villain Count Fosco is described in very colorful and vivid language. Fosco is described as being extremely fat, with Napoleonic features. He has a fondness for animals such as canaries and mice, and enjoys having mice crawling about him. The image of Fosco is decidedly "foreign." It is not surprising that the author would wish to cast the villain in a foreign mold. In Victorian literature, the villain is often a foreigner with dubious morals who comes to corrupt a morally virtuous English society. By portraying Fosco with the facial features of one Britain’s most hated enemies, Napoleon Bonaparte, the author places him in the mold of the suspicious foreigner and enables the Victorian reader to develop an instant mistrust towards him.

## Marian Halcombe's masculine features

The appearance of Marian Halcombe is also worth noting, because it totally defies the conventional Victorian female image. Marian is described as having a feminine physical form, but she also possesses very masculine features. She is described as having a “large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw,” with “almost a mustache." When Walter first encounters Marian’s face, he is surprised and amazed. This is because her masculine facial features are totally at odds with her graceful feminine figure. This discrepancy has great significance and sheds light on Marian’s character. It shows that Marian has a woman’s body but a man’s head. Although she is trapped in a woman’s body and confined to the limitations of a woman’s life, she possesses the characteristics of a Victorian man. In the story, Marian exhibits all the conventionally masculine qualities by being brave, determined and resourceful in her attempts to defend the weak and self-effacing Laura.

## Laura Fairlie's delicate appearance

Laura’s physical image is also highly significant. She possesses highly feminine characteristics. She is described as having delicate features, gentle charms, and light coloring in her eyes and hair. She is fair and delicate with an innocent and truthful expression in her eyes. Laura is also described as being an expert musician, a highly prized talent in Victorian ladies. In short, Laura is painted in a highly feminized manner, and is presented as the contrasting character to the strong and masculine Marian. Laura’s feminine physical form serves to prepare the readers for her highly feminine character, which results in her being unable to advocate for herself or make decisions. Her femininity is both what inspires characters like Walter and Marian to be protective of her, and what leaves her in need of that protection.

## Anne Catherick's mysterious image

Anne is dressed from head to toe in white. Her appearance in the story is always sudden and of a short duration. Anne’s repeated appearances as the mysterious woman in white gradually increases the suspense of the story. Her emotional distress and distracted manners give her an aura of unfathomable mystery. She haunts Blackwater Park like a ghost, making the sinister setting of Blackwater Park all the more uncanny. Anne’s ghostly image haunts the story and instills it with an aura of suspense, tension and enigma.

# The Woman in White Asylums and Lunacy in the Victorian Era

In the time just before Collins wrote [*The Woman in White*](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-woman-in-white), England was gripped with "lunacy panic." The fear was not that madmen and madwomen were roaming the streets. Rather, people became increasingly afraid that healthy and sane individuals were being wrongly imprisoned in lunatic asylums, where they were stripped of their rights, freedoms, and sometimes their property.

Concerns about regulation and documentation of the conditions under which someone could be admitted to an insane asylum dated back to the 1700s. At this time, there was no regulation of private "madhouses," which were run on a for-profit basis, and there was very little association with medical treatment. In the 1750s and 60s, several cases were brought forward in which an individual raised concerns that a friend or family member was being wrongly detained. Investigations led to their release, and also to increasing calls to reform and restrict the admission process. In 1774, the British Parliament passed the Act for the Regulation of Private Madhouses (the Madhouses Act). The Act required that all residences housing more than one lunatic be subject to licensing and inspection. A patient could also only be accepted into a private asylum if a certificate was obtained from a medical professional testifying to their mental instability.

However, despite this new regulation, concerns about asylums persisted. While private patients (those whose care was being paid for) had to be certified, so called "pauper lunatics" could also be sent to private asylums if their local region decided to cover the costs out of their charitable budget, and these patients did not need documentation by doctors. The certification itself was unreliable; there was nothing to restrict individuals with a conflict of interest (for example, a doctor who was also paid by the asylum) from signing certificates and many individuals, even with dubious credentials, were qualified to sign. Even if someone seemed legitimately to be in need of full-time care, there were persistent reports of abuse and terrible conditions in both public and private asylums. Between 1807 and 1827, four separate government committees met to hear evidence about bad conditions and the possibility that individuals were being wrongfully admitted. In 1828, a new act was passed with stricter admission requirements, requiring a private patient to have two certificates from two different doctors, who could not have any association with an asylum.

However, scandals about wrongful detainment continued. In particular, there were fears that wealthy individuals (who could be either men or women) would be wrongfully detained so that greedy relatives could access their money, or that vindictive husbands would have their wives institutionalized to effectively get rid of them in an era where divorce was still very hard to obtain. The latter concern was publicized by a wide spread scandal in the late 1850s in which the well-known writer, Edward Bulwer Lytton, attempted to declare his wife Rosina insane and have her institutionalized. Because it was well-known that the two had a very volatile marriage and were involved in a bitter custody dispute, it was largely believed that Rosina did not need to be kept in an asylum. The case, along with others in 1858-1859, led to widespread media coverage. Collins drew on this interest to animate the plot of his novel, adding sensational and Gothic elements.

# The Woman in White Literary Elements

## Genre

Sensation novel with Gothic elements.

## Setting and Context

England in the early 1850’s. Most events take place in old English country estates including Limmeridge House and Blackwater Park. Some events take place in London.

## Narrator and Point of View

The novel is written in epistolary form, comprising various first-person narrators. Important narrators include Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe. Several peripheral characters are also narrators, such as Mr. Gilmore, Frederick Fairlie, Mrs. Catherick, the doctor and the housekeeper. However, three important characters, including Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick and Sir Percival are not narrators.

## Tone and Mood

The tone and mood of the novel is mysterious, uncanny, suspenseful, and unsettling. The entire plotline is charged with tension and readers are never sure what is going to happen next, or what new information is going to be received. There is the sense that characters are usually being threatened with some sort of danger and can never be entirely at ease.

## Protagonist and Antagonist

Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe are the female protagonists. Walter Hartright is the male protagonist. Sir Percival and Fosco are the male antagonists.

## Major Conflict

Walter and Marian try to protect Laura’s property and legal identity, while Sir Percival and Fosco try to usurp Laura’s wealth. Anne Catherick threatens to expose Percival’s secret, while Percival tries to silence and discredit her by placing her in the asylum.

## Climax

Although Laura Fairlie has been pronounced dead, she appears as a living person while Walter Hartright is visiting her supposed grave.

## Foreshadowing

Anne Catherick’s anonymous letter foreshadows Laura Fairlie’s unhappy marriage. Marian Halcombe dreams of Walter Halright suffering from pestilence and shipwreck, all of which Walter eventually encounters.

## Understatement

Anne and Laura’s imprisonment in the asylum are understated. The readers are not provided with detailed description of their sufferings in the asylum.

## Allusions

“I came, saw and conquered”:  
Count Fosco visits Frederick Fairlie and tricks him into writing an invitation for Laura Fairlie. By doing so, Count Fosco is able to lure Laura Fairlie away from Blackwater Park and into his control. As Fosco describes the success of his trickery over Frederick Fairlie, he uses the famous expression “I came, saw and conquered Fairlie”. This is an allusion to Julius Caesar’s famous utterance “veni, vidi, vici.” This expression is used to describe a rapid and conclusive victory over the enemies. By borrowing an expression from the legendary Caesar, Fosco brings out the proud swagger of his character. It shows that a dull invalid like Frederick Fairlie stands no chance against the calculated schemes of a sophisticated criminal like Fosco. This allusion is in perfect keeping with Fosco’s expressive rhetoric and exuberant personality.  
  
The allusion to sirens of ancient mythology:  
Walter Hartright compares his love for Laura Fairlie to the the siren’s song luring him to destruction. This allusion refers to the beautiful female sirens of Greek mythology, who use their seductive singing to distract sailors, causing them to shipwreck their boats. By comparing his love for Laura with the destructive sirens' songs, Walter expresses his deep feelings for Laura and the impossibility of their love. Marrying outside of one’s class was not an easy affair during the Victorian period. Walter is acutely conscious of the fact that the socially privileged Laura could not marry an impoverished drawing teacher like himself. This allusion shows that Walter is a sensible man, who understands and respects the rigid restrictions of Victorian hierarchy. Despite his genuine feelings for Laura, he is conscious of the impossibility of this relationship, and is careful not to take advantage of Laura.

## Imagery

Count Fosco's appearance is painted through a vivid description. He has Napoleonic features, wears extravagant waistcoats, plays with mice and boasts of eccentric manners. The author uses highly colorful languages to describe his unique appearance and manners. He is described as a man with an exuberant personality and a fascinating character. He is an exotic spectacle and a fascinating image to behold.

## Paradox

When Marian informs Walter of Laura’s betrothal to Sir Percival, she says that she must give him pain in order to be kind to him. This is a paradox, because it seems impossible to be cruel and kind and the same time. However, this statement is true. Although Walter’s knowledge of Laura’s engagement may cause him pain, such knowledge is beneficial to him because it compels him to disengage himself from a romance which has no future.

## Parallelism

Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick are described as parallel figures. Their striking physical resemblance turns them into each other’s doubles. Walter first meets Anne, but but falls in love with Laura. Even though Walter does not acknowledge this, it is possible that he first develops feelings for Anne, and revives this romantic feeling in Laura.

Anne’s emotional suffering and imprisonment in the asylum foreshadow the suffering and imprisonment Laura will soon endure, thus making Anne the perfect double for Laura. Anne’s imprisonment in the asylum indicates that Laura’s marriage is also a form of imprisonment which can turn a healthy woman into an emotionally deranged person. Laura’s intense suffering at the hands of her husband’s persecution indeed turns her into an emotionally disturbed woman. Laura loses part of her wit and memory after her imprisonment in the asylum. In the story, Laura endures all the sufferings which Anne had been subjected to.

The final revelation that Laura and Anne are actually half-sisters clarifies their physical resemblance to each other, and why they have shared parallel experiences. At the same time, Laura's fate eventually turns out to be happy because she is born legitimate, and therefore entitled to wealth, privilege and education. Anne's fate is much more grim because she grows up in poverty and has no one to help or protect her.

## Metonymy and Synecdoche

When Marian expresses her resentment about having been condemned to "patience and petticoats" for life, she uses the rhetorical device of metonymy. A petticoat is a female garment which cannot literally rule over anyone. When Marian says that she is a slave to petticoats, she means she is a slave to the conventional gender role which forces women to wear petticoats. Petticoats are also a synecdoche, because the wearing of petticoat is only a part of the Victorian gender expectation. Apart from petticoats, Victorian women are also subjected to many other restrictions on their lives, such as the lack of education and career opportunities.

## Personification

Count Fosco's mice are described as his best friends. The mice are attributed with human qualities. The mice seem to possess human minds and are able to understand Fosco’s orders and wishes. The mice are very obedient and crawl all over him like his children.

Themes:

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| Theme AnalysisEvidence and Law | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/themes/morality-crime-and-punishment)**  [Morality, Crime, and Punishment](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/themes/morality-crime-and-punishment) |

The law is presented as a flawed institution in Wilkie Collins’ novel *The Woman in White*. In the novel, [**Walter Hartright**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/walter-hartright), a young drawing teacher who is in love with [**Laura Fairlie**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/laura-fairlie), tries to expose her husband, [**Sir Percival Glyde**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/sir-percival-glyde), and his accomplice [**Count Fosco**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/count-fosco), for trying to steal Laura’s inheritance. The case also concerns the mystery of the “woman in [**white**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/symbols/white-clothes),” a young woman named [**Anne Catherick**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/anne-catherick-the-woman) who has escaped from an asylum and who strongly resembles Laura. When Anne dies, Count Fosco confines Laura in the asylum under Anne’s name, in order to fake her death and lay claim to her fortune. Although Walter uses certain legal methods, such as the compilation of written evidence, to build his case against Sir Percival, the law itself is depicted as a limited institution that is easily influenced by powerful individuals. Therefore, law is presented as a force that can easily be abused and used against vulnerable people like Laura and Anne. In Collins’ novel, it is the effort of individuals like Walter, rather than the institution of the law itself, that discovers the truth and triumphs over corruption and conspiracy.

The structure of *The Woman in White* suggests that the collection of written evidence is an effective way of reaching a fair verdict in a court of law—at least in theory. The story of *The Woman in White* is presented to the reader as a series of documents collected by Walter, which narrate the events of the story from the perspective of several witnesses. In this sense, the novel deliberately mimics the process of providing evidence to a jury in order to ascertain the facts of a case. Walter states that he will only describe the events for which he was present; the rest will be told through the written testimony of others, through letters, diaries, and legal documents. Walter’s disclaimer mimics the objectivity that is achieved when evidence is set before an unbiased jury. By distancing himself from parts of the narrative, Walter is unable to influence the opinion of his readers, who will play the role of the “judge” in examining the case of the conspiracy. Walter believes that the reader will be able to compare the different written accounts of events and successfully decide which characters are innocent and which are guilty in the story. A comparison of written evidence further aids Walter in the novel when he is able to compare Sir Percival Glyde’s forged copy of the church register with the unbiased one kept by a clerk, which does not include the entry of Sir Percival’s parents’ marriage (because they were never married) and proves that Sir Percival is not really the Baronet of Blackwater as he claims to be. This incident, and the overarching structure of the novel, suggests that the legal structure of a court case, in which evidence is presented to an unbiased jury, can be an effective method of judging guilt in a crime.

However, although Collins suggests that legal methods work well in theory, in reality the law is not unbiased, and the characters in the novel are repeatedly let down by the legal system. Walter acknowledges that the case he has carefully compiled is never put before a court. Although he is convinced that a jury would support his case, “the machinery of the Law” is still “the pre-engaged servant of the long purse.” This suggests that people with money wield the most legal power in nineteenth-century England. This is demonstrated when Walter approaches [**Mr. Kyrle**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/mr-kyrle), the Fairlie’s lawyer, with the evidence he has compiled. Mr. Kyrle will not help Walter take his case against Sir Percival and Count Fosco to court because he knows that—without Laura’s inheritance, which has been stolen—Walter will not have enough money to fund a lengthy trial. This demonstrates that poor people like Walter and Laura do not get a fair hearing in the justice system as lawyers are unlikely to take on poorer clients. This is further implied by the fact that the narrative contains no evidence from either Anne or Laura’s perspective. Those who are poor and vulnerable like Anne, or socially vulnerable like Laura (who is a woman and has fewer legal rights and protections than men), are voiceless in the nineteenth-century justice system, revealing the legal system to be ineffective and flawed.

Rather than helping vulnerable individuals, the law and legal evidence can be used against them by powerful individuals, such as Sir Percival Glyde, who are able to gain the support of the law, or defy it entirely, because of their money and privilege. For instance, Sir Percival Glyde marries Laura because he knows that he can legally claim her fortune if he can convince her to sign it over to him before her death, which he and Count Fosco conspire to fake. Although [**Marian**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/marian-halcombe), Laura’s half-sister, appeals to her lawyer, [**Mr. Gilmore**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-woman-in-white/characters/mr-gilmore), to help Laura break her engagement to Sir Percival, Mr. Gilmore is easily won over by Sir Percival’s charming facade and reputation as a wealthy and noble man. Although Mr. Gilmore feels sympathetic towards Laura, he does not (at first) suspect Sir Percival. Mr. Gilmore’s inaction suggests that powerful individuals like Sir Percival cannot easily be stopped as they are able to use their wealth to bring the law round to their side. When Count Fosco succeeds in his plan to fake Laura’s death, both the legal evidence of Laura’s death certificate and the written testimony on the tombstone, which bears Laura’s name, legally bar Laura from retrieving her identity or inheriting her fortune, which goes to Sir Percival and is split with Count Fosco instead. This situation—and the novel as a whole—reveals that while examining written evidence can be a reliable system of fathoming truth, the system of judging this evidence must be unbiased, otherwise it will be exploited by powerful individuals and wielded against those who are poor or vulnerable.