The Woman in White

Wilkie Collins

About the author
Wilkie (William) Collins can be described as the author of the first full-length detective stories in English. Born in London in 1824, he was the son of a landscape painter. He was educated at private schools, but received his real education on a two-year tour of Italy with his family. He trained as a lawyer, but became a full-time writer in his early twenties. During the 1860s, with the publication of novels of mystery, suspense and crime, he became a household name. Of these novels, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) were the most successful, and are still widely read today.

Collins was very highly thought of by contemporary critics and his books were widely read in both America and Europe. The famous British author Charles Dickens was his friend and mentor, and like Dickens, Collins was a tireless social campaigner. After 1870, Collins’s novels concentrated more on social issues such as prostitution and vivisection than on good story-telling.

Collins suffered from gout, and was addicted to opium for the last twenty-seven years of his life (at the time, opium was considered to be a safe painkiller). Collins’s private life was unconventional: he had two mistresses and married neither of them, although he had three children by one, Martha Rudd. He died in 1889.

Summary
Late one night on a lonely road a young art teacher, Walter Hartright, meets a strange woman dressed all in white. They talk together and Walter is puzzled by the fact that the woman knows a member of the family he is about to start work with. Walter goes to Limmeridge House and starts his new job, teaching art to two half-sisters, Laura Fairlie and Marian, whose parents are both dead. He falls in love with Laura, who closely resembles the ‘woman in white’, but Laura marries another man, as she promised to her father. She is unhappy, as her husband is interested only in her money. He also has a terrible secret that the ‘woman in white’ knows. He and his sinister friend plot to steal Laura’s money by substituting the ‘woman in white’ for Laura. But Laura’s husband dies in a fire trying to eliminate the traces of his forgery. Laura and Walter reunite and get married.

PART 1
Chapter 1: One night Walter meets a strange woman dressed all in white. They talk together and Walter is very much surprised to hear the woman talking about the place and the family he is on his way to see. Before he can ask her any questions, she disappears.

Chapter 2: Walter goes to Cumberland. At Limmeridge House he meets his pupils, Marian and Laura, who are half-sisters. Walter notices that Laura resembles the ‘woman in white’ very much. He tells Marian about the strange woman. She is keen to help him solve the mystery.

Chapter 3: Walter enjoys his life at Limmeridge House. He falls in love with Laura and makes friends with Marian. But Marian advises him to leave Limmeridge House, because Laura is engaged to baronet Sir Percival Glyde, who is coming soon. Laura receives an anonymous warning against her future marriage, and Walter remembers the ‘woman in white’ talking about some wicked and cruel baronet. He thinks the warning letter is from that woman.

Chapter 4: Walter goes to the churchyard to see the strange woman who was seen there. They meet and she gives him her name, Anne Catherick, and that she has escaped from the asylum where Sir Percival shut her up. Then she gets frightened and runs away.

Chapter 5: Before Walter goes away, he and Marian go to the village to find Anne Catherick to talk to her. When they arrive, they find that Anne has already gone.

Chapter 6: Mr Gilmore, the family lawyer, comes to draw up the marriage settlement. He sends a copy of the warning letter to Sir Percival asking for an explanation. Walter leaves Limmeridge House. Laura is very unhappy as she is in love with Walter.
Chapter 7: Sir Percival Glyde comes to Limmeridge House and explains that Anne’s mother used to be his loyal servant. To thank her, he paid for her daughter Anne, who has mental problems, to be placed in an asylum. Marian writes a letter to Mrs Catherick and receives confirmation that this is true. After that Laura agrees to marry Sir Percival, as she does not want to break her promise to her late father.

Chapter 8: When discussing the marriage settlement, Sir Percival insists on having his wife’s money in case of her death. Mr Gilmore does not like the idea. As Laura is not twenty-one yet, he visits her uncle, Mr Fairlie, to discuss it. But Mr Fairlie agrees to Sir Percival’s claims.

Chapter 9: Walter leaves for Central America for eighteen months. Laura’s wedding date is decided – 22 December – in four weeks’ time. Sir Percival tries to find Anne Catherick, but she is gone. Sir Percival and Laura get married and leave for Italy.

PART 2
Chapter 1: Six months later Marian comes to Blackwater Park, Sir Percival’s house, where she learns that Mrs Catherick has secretly visited to find out any news about her daughter. Marian decides to visit Mrs Catherick.

Chapter 2: Sir Percival and Laura come from Italy with Count Fosco, Sir Percival’s friend. Laura is very unhappy, it’s clear now that her husband married her for her money only. To clear out his debts he needs to obtain his wife’s money, Marian overhears a conversation and tells Laura about it.

Chapter 3: Sir Percival learns about Mrs Catherick’s visit which makes him very angry. He tries to make Laura sign some document about her money but fails. Outraged, Sir Percival leaves Blackwater Park.

Chapter 4: Marian and Laura go to an old boathouse and see a strange figure. They become frightened and go home, but someone is following them, and it is not Count Fosco. Laura goes to the boathouse again and meets Anne Catherick there. Anne tells her she wrote the warning and followed her last time. She also says she know a terrible secret about Sir Percival. Suddenly she gets frightened and runs away without revealing the secret.

Chapter 5: Sir Percival comes back. Count Fosco, who has seen Laura’s meeting with Anne, tells him about the meeting, and they go to the boathouse to wait for Anne there. But Anne never appears. Sir Percival reads Anne’s note to Laura and becomes frustrated.

Chapter 6: Marian eavesdrops on Sir Percival and Count Fosco plotting to obtain Laura’s money in the event of her death. Count Fosco asks about the woman he has seen with Laura in the boathouse. Sir Percival explains it is Anne Catherick and says that by coincidence, she looks as if his wife would look after a long illness.

Chapter 7: When spying on Sir Percival and Count Fosco, Marian becomes so terribly ill and is bedridden. Sir Percival closes up Blackwater Park, and Count Fosco moves to London. Laura is told that he has taken Marian with him and she also leaves for London. But Marian is still at Blackwater Park. She had been moved to another room.

Chapter 8: Lady Glyde arrives at Count Fosco’s house. She looks very frightened and very ill. The next day she dies. Lady Glyde’s body is sent to Limmeridge and buried in her mother’s grave.

Chapter 9: Walter Hartright returns to Britain, where he learns about Laura’s death. He goes to Limmeridge to visit Laura’s grave, as he still loves her. But in the churchyard he meets Marian, and the still very much alive, Laura.

PART 3
Chapter 1: Marian, Laura and Walter rent a small flat in London. Marian tells Walter their story. After she recovered from her illness, she learned that Laura had died of a heart problem. Anne Catherick had been found and put in the asylum again. Her mental problems got worse and she thinks she is Lady Glyde. Marian went to the asylum and found Laura there. She helped Laura to escape, and they went to Limmeridge, where they met Walter.

Chapter 2: Laura says that Count Fosco met her in London and took her to some place to meet her sister. There he gave her a cup of strange tea, she fainted and recovered in the asylum again. Her mental problems got worse and she thinks she is Lady Glyde. Marian went to the asylum and found Laura there. She helped Laura to escape, and they went to Limmeridge, where they met Walter.

Chapter 3: Walter wants to find out Sir Percival’s secret so he can use it to destroy him and goes to see Mrs Catherick. At the end of a difficult conversation, she tells him to go to the church and look at the book of marriage records.
Chapter 4: Walter goes to the church and finds that the entry for Sir Percival’s parents’ marriage is a forgery – his parents never married, which means that he is not a baronet and has no legal rights for Blackwater Park. Moreover, he can be sent to prison.

Chapter 5: Sir Percival understands he is in danger and comes to the church to destroy the forged page. He accidentally starts a fire, gets trapped inside and dies.

Chapter 6: Sir Percival’s death is officially recognized as death by accident. Walter receives a note from Mrs Catherick explaining the extraordinary resemblance of Laura and Anne – they are half-sister, and have the same father.

Chapter 7: Walter comes back to London. He tells Marian the whole story, but they decide to tell Laura only about her husband’s death. Walter and Laura get married. Walter brings Laura to Limmeridge House where he explains what has happened. She is legally recognized as being alive, and after her uncle’s death, inherits Limmeridge House.

Background and themes

Where the story came from: The plot of The Woman in White, although very exciting, seems unlikely: a woman is robbed of her money when her identity is confused with another woman who looks like her. It is now known that Collins found the basic plot for The Woman in White in a book of French crimes which he bought from a bookstall in Paris. This book, Recueil des Causes Celebres, by Maurice Mejan, gave an account of a sensational lawsuit which was strikingly similar to the events in Collins’s novel. There are even similarities between the people in the lawsuit and the main characters in the novel.

Similarly, the dramatic meeting of the hero Walter Hartright with the ‘woman in white’ at night on a lonely road, also had a basis in real life. The famous English painter, John Millais, tells the story of how he and Collins were walking in North London one evening, when they heard a scream in a garden nearby. A young and beautiful woman in a long white dress came running towards them, begging for help. Collins followed her and did not return that night. The woman’s name was Caroline Graves and Collins subsequently lived with her for many years.

Genre: Written in 1860, The Woman in White is one of the most successful examples of ‘the novel of sensation’. This genre of fiction first started in the 1860s and was characterized by stories of mystery and crime – sinister secrets that were slowly uncovered, in an atmosphere of great suspense. Even though the events were often unlikely and sensational, they took place in everyday settings of the time, and this created a feeling of greater realism. Wilkie Collins was a master of this genre.

Modern detective novel: The ‘novel of sensation’ gave rise to the modern detective novel. Indeed, in The Woman in White, Walter Hartright and Marian act as amateur detectives. The Moonstone (1868), Collins’s other huge success, is even more of a detective story.

Heroes and heroines: Novels of this kind generally have a hero, a heroine and a villain. In The Woman in White, there are two heroines and two villains. Laura, the woman Walter loves, is the type of woman popular with Englishmen in the nineteenth century. She is very beautiful, very feminine, and very inactive; she does almost nothing. Laura’s sister, Marian, on the other hand, is extremely clever, practical and active; she takes care of Laura. She is also ugly. The novel demonstrates the strong tendency of men in nineteenth century England to see desirable women as very feminine and passive.

Villains: The two villains in The Woman in White are Sir Percival Glyde, Laura’s husband, and his friend, Count Fosco. Sir Percival, although evil, is not as clever as Count Fosco. It is Count Fosco who thinks up the plan that substitutes the ‘woman in white’ for Laura, and it is he who carries out the plan. This adds complexity and interest to the story; and what fun it is to have two villains rather than one!

Suspense: When Wilkie Collins wrote The Woman in White, he was at the height of his writing ability. The plot is detailed and carefully worked out. The creation of suspense is extremely skillful. The book was first written in serial form and consequently chapters often end on a note of suspense. The author uses the new and experimental technique of different characters telling the story at different points. This is a superb way of creating greater interest, and Collins brilliantly creates an atmosphere of fear. It is no surprise that the novel remains so popular today.
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Discussion activities

PART 1
Chapters 1–3
Before reading
1 Guess and discuss: Have students look at the cover of the book and discuss the following: What genre is this book? Why do you think so?
2 Discuss: Collins’s novels are called novels of sensation. Ask students to discuss this: What do you imagine are the main features of his novels?

While reading
3 Discuss: Have students discuss the following questions: What’s Mr Fairlie’s attitude towards the girls? How do you think it will influence their lives?

After reading
4 Discuss: Put students into small groups, and ask them to answer the following: In each chapter, one or two strange things happen. Say what these strange things are. Is there an explanation for these events? If so, what is the explanation or what might it be?
5 Write: Ask students to imagine they are Walter Hartright. They write a letter to his mother describing his life at Limmeridge House.

Chapters 4–6
Before reading
6 Guess: Will Walter and Marian find the ‘woman in white’?
In pairs, students write five ideas for what might happen in the next chapters. Have them compare their ideas in small groups.

While reading
7 Check: In groups, students check their ideas from activity 6. Who was most close to the book?
8 Role play: In pairs, students plan and act out the conversation about local news between the farmer’s wife and Anne Catherick.
Student A is the farmer’s wife and tells Anne Catherick about the local news. Student B is Anne Catherick who looks pale and sad.

After reading
9 Discuss: Have students discuss the following questions: What is your opinion of the Woman in White so far? Do you think she is mad? Give reasons for your opinions.

10 Group work: In small groups students decide on an illustration for each chapter. The picture must illustrate the most important event in the chapter. Each group then describes their illustration to the class.

11 Role play: Imagine Walter and Laura express their true feelings for each other before they part. In pairs, students plan and act out their conversation. Student A is Walter and Student B is Laura.

12 Write: Ask students to write an entry for Laura’s diary about Walter’s departure. Is she upset? Is she sad? What does she think and hope?

Chapters 7–9
Before reading
13 Discuss: Ask students to discuss these questions: What do you think Walter is going to do after he leaves Limmeridge House? Do you think he was right to leave? Why/Why not?

While reading
14 Role play: In pairs, students plan and act out the conversation between Sir Percival and Mr Gilmore about the anonymous letter Laura received. Student A is Sir Percival and explains why Anne was put in an asylum. Student B is Mr Gilmore and asks Sir Percival questions.

15 Write: Ask students to imagine they are Marian. Write a letter to Mrs Catherick asking for the information to prove Sir Percival’s explanations.
Dear Mrs Catherick,
I am writing you to ask you about …
I hope to hear from you soon.
Warm regards,
Marian Halcombe

After reading
16 Discuss: Have students discuss the following: What ideas did Sir Percival’s lawyer’s note give to Mr Gilmore?

17 Research and discuss: Laura’s marriage is an ‘arranged marriage’ – in other words, a marriage where the parents choose the marriage partner for their son or daughter. Have students do research on arranged marriages on the Internet. What are the advantages and disadvantages of arranged marriages? Do you agree with the idea of arranged marriages?

18 Research: Ask students to find out and write about the position of women in Britain in the nineteenth century. What role did a marriage settlement play in their lives?

PART 2
Chapters 1–4
While reading
19 Discuss: Have students discuss the following: Why do you think Count Fosco came to the Blackwater Park? What role will he play in the story?

20 Discuss: Have students discuss the following: What do you think Sir Percival’s ‘terrible secret’ could be?

After reading
21 Group work: In small groups, students write one sentence about each of the following characters. Each group then reads their sentences out to the class and the class votes for the sentence that best describes each character: Laura, Marian, Sir Percival Glyde, Count Fosco, Walter Hartright.
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22 Discuss: Ask students to think about the following: How do you feel about the book so far? Give reasons for your feelings.

23 Write: Have students imagine they are Laura. Students write a letter to Walter in which Laura describes her present life and tells him her true feelings towards him and Sir Percival.

Chapters 5–9

While reading

24 Write: Get students to see what happened in the Blackwater Park through Count Fosco’s eyes and write them down.

After reading

25 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following: In your opinion, what is the main motive of the following characters? In other words, what is it that makes them do the things they do? Marian, Laura, Sir Percival, Count Fosco

26 Discuss: Have students discuss this: Both Sir Percival and Count Fosco are wicked men. Which man do you think is worse? Give reasons for your opinion.

27 Group work: In small groups, students discuss the following question: What do you think is the most dramatic moment in each of these chapters? Then they put the dramatic moments in order from most dramatic to least dramatic and compare their order to other groups, giving reasons for their order.

PART 3

Chapters 1–3

Before reading

28 Guess: In small groups, students write three questions they would like to know about what really happened and why Laura was alive and standing in front of her own grave.

After reading

29 Check: Ask students to answer the questions they wrote for activity 28.

30 Role play: Each student chooses one of the characters from the book. Have students walk around the class asking each other ‘yes/no’ questions. They can ask up to five questions each. The other students must guess who they are.

31 Discuss and write: In small groups, students discuss whether or not they agree with the following statement, giving reasons for their opinion. After discussion, ask them to write one or two paragraphs about it. Marian is the real heroine of The Woman in White.

32 Write: Have students write an explanation of what Sir Percival and Count Fosco did to Laura, Marian and Anne Catherick. Do you think Sir Percival and Count Fosco are bad people? Why/Why not?

Chapters 4–7

Before reading

33 Guess: Have students guess the following: What do you think will happen to Sir Percival? Will his secret be made public?

While reading

34 Check: Have students check their answers to the questions from activity 33.

35 Write: Ask students to imagine they are Walter. Write a message to Marian describing his first meeting with Mrs Catherick.

After reading

36 Write: Have students imagine they are Mr Gilmore. Write a letter to Mr Fairlie informing him that Laura is alive and is coming to Limmeridge House.

37 Group work: In small groups, students tell the story of these chapters from the point of view of the following characters. Each student takes it in turns to say one sentence.

a Marian
b Laura
c Walter

Extra activities

38 Project: In groups, students work on the following: What does this book tell us about the morals of the nineteenth century? Compare the social situation of those days with the present one. What has changed? Do you think the changes are for the better? Why/Why not? Present your findings in a book or magazine format.

39 Discuss and group work: Collins’s advice to other writers was: ‘Make ‘em laugh, make ‘em cry, make ‘em wait.’ (‘em = them, i.e. the readers) In small groups, students discuss how Collins does this in The Woman in White. Students can look through the book to find examples. Then have a whole-class discussion about it.