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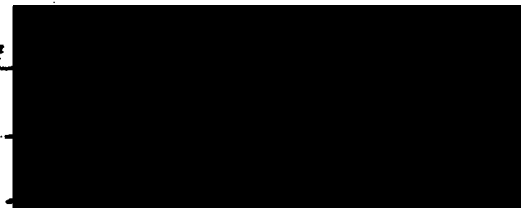
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SYMPATHY WITH SIN:
THE SENSATIONAL WORLD OF WILKIE COLLINS

by

Marjorie Norma Weir

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL PULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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of
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APPROVAL

NAME: Marjorie Norma Weir

DEGREE: Master of Arts

TITLE OF THESIS: Sympathy with Sin:
The Sensational World of Wilkie Collins

EXAMINING COMMITTEE: Chairperson: Professor Edgar F. Harden

Professor Michael Steig
Senior Supervisor
Professor of English, SFU

Professor Mason D. Harris
Associate Professor of English, SEU

Professor Margaret Blom
External Examiner
Associate Professor of English, U.B.C.

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Author:

(signature)

MARJORIE NORMA WEIR

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28 March 1983

(date)

ABSTRACT

The popular sensation novel of the 1860s owed its success to a huge reading audience avid for escape from the tedium of conventional Victorian middle-class life. Sensation novelists drew upon elements of the Gothic novel, the Newgate novel and the traditions of the stage melodrama. They combined these elements in suspenseful plots, sustained by an accumulation of sensational incidents: theft, adultery, abduction, murder, and secrets of all kinds, while at the same time retaining the urban and domestic settings familiar to their audience. Many of the novels were written by women and featured rebellious heroines who rejected their traditional roles. Readers delighted in seeing convention thus defied; they enjoyed the opportunity to indulge a surreptitious sympathy with sin.

His friend Charles Dickens aside, Wilkie Collins was the most famous of the sensation novelists. In his novels he broke away from the good/bad stereotypes of the melodrama, taking an interest in the criminal and the fallen woman, which went beyond the usual Victorian preoccupation with repentance and punishment. He presented the female social outcast as a candidate for rehabilitation rather than condemnation.

Collins' own unconventional domestic arrangements exhibited the same blend of the rational and the romantic which is found in his novels; he appears to have been at once threatened and fascinated by strong women. His novels illustrate this conflict, presenting resolute and aggressive heroines who effectively

diminish the virtuous men with whom they are associated. Only Collins' villains, rogues and madmen are strong enough to partner these women.

Ultimately, however, Collins opts for safe, conventional "happy endings." Forced to renounce the tragic heroism that might more realistically be the result of their complex personalities, most of Collins' heroines abandon their adventures and settle for "domestic bliss." Conflicts within Collins' personality reflect the ambivalent attitude toward women of contemporary Victorian society and render him unable to translate the implications inherent in his diminished heroes and resolute heroines into social realities at the conclusions of his novels.

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Sympathy with Sin:

The Sensational World of Wilkie Collins

In a small bookseller's shop I discovered some cheap translations of French novels. Here I found what I wanted--sympathy with sin. Here there was opened to me a new world inhabited entirely by unrepentant people; the magnificent women diabolically beautiful; the satanic men dead to every sense of virtue, and alive--perhaps rather dirtily alive--to the splendid fascinations of crime.

Collins, The Legacy of Cain

CHAPTER 1

Wilkie Collins and the Sensation Novel

One must always have something sensational to read on the train.

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

By the middle of the eighteen-sixties, the new railway bookstalls of W.H. Smith were piled high with yellow-backed reprints of the popular "sensation" novels. The books provided ideal reading for the London commuter whiling away the time between the City and his villa in the suburbs. Left at home, bored wives and daughters devoured the latest "sensations" hot off the press and conveniently delivered to the door in three-volume sets by Mr. Mudie's Circulating Library. Reviewers sounded the alarm; but they were ignored by a public voracious for "sensations". When a fellow dinner-guest remarked to Wilkie Collins that his books were read in every back-kitchen in

England,¹ her rather tactless remark was correct. Collins could have retorted, however, that his novels were also to be found in every drawing room.

William Wilkie Collins was born at 11 Cavendish Street, London, in 1824, and was to live all of his 65 years within a few miles of his birthplace. His father, William, Sr., was a well-known artist and member of the Royal Academy. Fortunately, he was sympathetic to his son's literary and artistic aspirations, and following apprenticeships to the tea-trade and the law (he was actually called to the Bar in 1851), young Wilkie found himself at liberty to pursue the career of his choice.

Collins' first literary undertaking was an historical romance entitled Antonina, or the Fall of Rome. This work had to be put aside, however, upon the death of the author's father in 1847. In accordance with his father's wishes, Collins compiled and published a biography: The Memoirs of the Life of William Collins (1848). This work completed, he was at last able to give his full attention to Antonina which was finally published in 1850.

To the modern reader the book seems a relentlessly tedious piece of work. Purple passages and lachrymose sentimentality abound:

As the last sounds of her voice and her lute died softly away upon the still night air, an indescribable

¹ W. P. Frith, My Autobiography and Reminiscences (London: R. Bentley, 1887-'88), II, 334.

elevation appeared in the girl's countenance. She looked up rapturously in to the far, star-bright sky; her lip quivered; her dark eyes filled with tears, and her bosom heaved with the excess of the emotions that the music and the scene inspired.²

The dialogue is melodramatic, declamatory and (for Collins) remarkably humourless:

His face was deathlike in hue, as the face of the corpse above him--thick drops of perspiration trickled down it like rain--his dry, glaring eyes wandered fiercely over the countenances before him; and as he extended towards them his clenched hands, he muttered in a deep gasping whisper:--"Who has done this? MY MOTHER! MY MOTHER!" (XVII, 504)

Nevertheless in Antonina elements common to Collins' later novels appear for the first time. Here we find, for example, the first of Collins' many prefaces, stoutly asserting the author's intentions and defending the accuracy of his facts; ". . . exact truth with respect to time, place, and circumstance is observed in every historical event in the plot. . ." (XVII, 6). Here also, is the frank sensuality which was later to result in accusations of "prurience." In a chapter suggestively titled "The Bed-Chamber," Antonina lies asleep at the mercy of her would-be seducer, Vetricio:

Her light linen dress had become so disordered during the night that it displayed her throat and part of her bosom, in all the dawning beauties of their youthful formation. . . . He now passed his arm round her waist,

² Wilkie Collins, Antonina, Vol. XVII of The Works of Wilkie Collins (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, 1900-01), p. 120. Subsequent references to Collins' novels are keyed to this thirty-volume edition. References will appear in the text citing volume and page numbers. The Moonstone, The Woman in White, Armadale, No Name, and Man and Wife are each published in two parts; Part One is contained in one volume and Part Two in all or part of a second volume. Therefore two different volume numbers are cited in reference to these novels.

slender figure; and . . . imprinted kiss after kiss on the pure lips that sleep had innocently abandoned to him. (XVII, 190, 192)

In Antonina we also find the domineering, masculine woman in conflict (or in partnership) with an amiable but weaker man, the love-at-first-sight motif, social criticism in the treatment of the decadent Romans, and a complex plot played out against a backdrop of fatalistic gloom. Most of these elements were to be handled more convincingly in later novels; nevertheless, reviewers were fairly enthusiastic about Antonina, and the book served to keep Collins' name before the public until the following year. In 1851 something happened which was to give shape and direction to Collins' future writing.

In her recent book on Collins, Sue Lonoff suggests that the author abandoned the historical romance because he sensed that the vogue for that kind of fiction was on the wane and because he found the necessary historical research uncongenial to his tastes.³ Collins himself stated in his 1852 Preface to Basil that he lacked inspiration for a second historical subject. All of this is probably true; however, it seems to me that a more important factor was the powerful influence of Charles Dickens. Antonina was published in early 1850 and Basil in late 1852. Between these dates, in March, 1851, Collins met Dickens and discovered "popular literature." By January of 1852 Collins had

³ Sue Lonoff, Hilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers (New York: AMS Press, 1982,) pp. 68-69. (I regret that this thesis was nearly complete when Ms. Lonoff's book became available to me. I was unable to deal with it fully in my final revisions, but see also p.9, n.10 and p.35, n.43.)

written a Christmas story, "Mr. Wray's Gash Box," which is highly derivative of Dickens' style. In April, what is perhaps Collins' best short story, "A Terribly Strange Bed," appeared as his first contribution to Dickens' Household Words. Thus it is not surprising that Basil is prefaced by these words:

The temptation of trying if I could not successfully address myself, at once, to the readiest sympathies and the largest numbers of readers, by writing a story of our times, was too much for me. So I wrote this book.⁴

In describing Basil (1852) as "a story of our times," Collins underestimates the part that "sensational" elements play in the novel, elements which were to characterize sensational fiction throughout the next decade. Still, "stories of our time" had not long been popular; it was only in the late 1840s that Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton, Thackeray's Vanity Fair, and Dickens' Dombey and Son (all published in 1848) had presented some aspects of the daily struggle for existence and advancement of the middle and working classes. As recently as 1838, Harriet Martineau's publisher had refused Deerbrook because of its contemporary setting:

People liked high-life novels and low life, and ancient life; and life of any rank presented by Dickens, which is very unlike the broad daylight of actual existence, English or other: but it was not supposed that they would bear a presentment of the familiar life of every day.⁵

⁴Wilkie Collins, Preface to Basil (London: Bentley, 1852), I, viii, quoted in Dorothy L. Sayers, Wilkie Collins, ed. R.R. Gregory (University of Toledo, 1977), p. 79.

⁵ Harriet Martineau, Autobiography with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman (London: Smith, Elder, 1877), II, 115.

Twenty years later the tastes of the middle and upper-classes had changed. In 1857 Anthony Trollope was greeted at a publisher's office with: "I hope it's not historical, Mr. Trollope? Whatever you do, don't be historical; your historical novel is not worth a damn."⁶ While readers still enjoyed a scandal in high life (Lady Audley's murderous tendencies), and a touch of Gothic horror (Miss Havisham festooned with cobwebs), their immediate concerns were urban, mercantile and domestic. Not for them the medieval vault or the sinister Italian monk. They liked their intrigue and terror grounded in the present; an extra frisson of fear was added when "sensations" occurred in familiar settings. The sensation novel was nothing if not up-to-date. Miss Braddon shows her awareness and enjoyment of this situation when in Lady Audley's Secret (1862), her detective Robert Audley prepares to expose the wicked Lady Audley, muttering to himself: "I haven't read Alexander Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing."⁷ Thus, while sensation novels abound in much that seems grotesque, violent and mysterious, the mysteries are, in the words of Henry James: ". . . mysteries which are at our doors. . . . Instead of the terrors of Udolpho, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. . . . Mrs. Radcliffe's mysteries were romances pure and simple; while those of Mr. Wilkie Collins were

⁶Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (1883) (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 80.

⁷Miss Elizabeth Braddon, Lady Audley's Secret (1862) (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), p. 263.

stern reality."⁸

Well, perhaps not a very stern reality, at least to modern readers, and many anxious critics at the time would have taken issue with James. Conservative readers accused the sensationalists of catering to the base instincts of the common man, the Victorian reader who was secretly in sympathy with sin; for the sensation novel offered its delighted reader a riot of dreams, presentiments, impersonations, crimes, illicit passions, and secrets of all kinds:

"My own Edgardo!--and you still love me? You would still marry me in spite of this dark mystery which surrounds me? In spite of the fatal history of my race? In spite of the ominous predictions of my aged nurse? . . . Ah! --what if he should know that I have two legitimate and three natural children? . . . Dare I confess that at the age of seven I poisoned my sister . . . that I threw my cousin from a swing at the age of twelve? That the lady's-maid who incurred the displeasure of my girlhood now lies at the bottom of the horse-pond? No! No! he is too pure--too good--too innocent to hear such improper conversation!" and her whole body writhed as she rocked to and fro in a paroxysm of grief.⁹

Bret Harte's merciless parody of the sensation novel is not so far from the real thing; for crime, horror, and the whole world of the Harlequin Romance are hardly modern literary phenomena. Sensationalism was intimately connected with both the Gothic novel and the stage melodrama, but urban readers preferred to find the Wicked Seducer, the Mysterious Other Woman

⁸Henry James, "Miss Braddon" (1865), in Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage, ed. Norman Page (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 123.

⁹ Bret Harte, Sensation Novels Condensed (London: Ward, Locke and Co., 1867), pp. 11-13.

and the Illegitimate Babe on the London doorstep rather than behind the creaking door of a decaying country mansion.

Nevertheless, the mansion and its Gothic atmosphere had a role to play in sensation fiction. For the most part, Collins abandoned the aristocratic trappings and foreign settings of the Gothic novel, but he retained some aspects of the supernatural and the horrific. These he evoked in the gloomy, fatalistic atmospheres and the remote and isolated sanatoria of The Woman in White (1860) and Armadale (1866), in the solitary and grisly experiments of Dr. Benjulia (Heart and Science, 1883), and in the decaying abode of Miserrimus Dexter and its grotesque inhabitant (The Law and the Lady, 1875). In The Woman in White, Marian Halcombe records her arrival at Blackwater House:

. . . I know nothing of the house, except that one wing of it is said to be five hundred years old, that it had a moat round it once, and that it gets its name of Blackwater from a lake in the park. Eleven o'clock has just struck, in a ghostly and solemn manner, from a turret over the centre of the house, which I saw when I came in. A large dog has been woke, apparently by the sound of the bell, and it is howling and yawning drearily, somewhere round the corner. I hear echoing footsteps in the passages below, and the iron thump of bolts and bars at the house door. . . . I wonder how Blackwater Park will look in the daytime? I don't altogether like it by night. (I, 296, 303)

The Gothic novel of the 1790s had taken a giant step away from eighteenth-century rationality. It abandoned restraint and order, evoking nature at its most chaotic and picturesque, and indulging in the uninhibited expression of emotion. The Gothic author sought to engage his readers' imaginations and intuitive faculties, and to invoke the marvellous as part of the natural

order. The mania for Gothic fiction raged between 1790 and 1810, but the Gothic atmosphere remained a major influence in literature well into the nineteenth century, affecting the imaginations of writers on both sides of the Channel; Collins' favourite French authors--Hugo, Balzac, Sue, Baudelaire--all show the Gothic influence in their writing. In England it permeated the medieval and renaissance histories of Collins' favourite British novelist, Walter Scott, whom Collins termed "King, Emperor, President, and God Almighty of novelists."¹⁰

Gothic fiction introduced certain stereotypical characters and patterns of action into the novel. These were appropriated during the same period by the stage melodrama, and perpetuated throughout the nineteenth century in such novels as, for example, Le Fanu's Uncle Silas (1862). In this novel we find the Gothic cast preserved intact: the tyrannical guardian, the incorruptible hero (never a match for the diabolically clever villain) and the pure self-sacrificing heroine ready to give up everything but her purity for the good of the family. In the melodrama these characters and their limited and predictable activities were incorporated into a narrative which, like that of the later sensation novel, depended primarily upon the interaction of suspense and sensational incident for its effect.

Superficially at least, the Gothic novel appears to center on the suffering heroine; Mrs. Radcliffe's popular Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) is undoubtedly Emily's book. But the Gothic

¹⁰ Lonoff, Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers, p. 5.

heroine, while providing a moral focus for the story, is essentially a passive figure, acted upon by the malignancy of various human oppressors and a fate which appears to be on their side. She makes stock responses to situations as they arise and we are allowed little insight into the workings (if any) of her mind. Being physically vulnerable, women were convenient victims and Emily is no exception; but it is an external torture that she must undergo, rather than the internal torment that the Victorian heroine was to withstand when confronted with a more complex moral dilemma. Certainly she lacks the qualities that were to enliven and distinguish the heroines of Collins' sensation novels: the reckless determination of Magdalen Vanstone (No Name, 1862), the courage and practical self-knowledge of Marian Halcombe (The Woman in White), and the compulsive need to confess of Lydia Gwilt (Armadale). Only rarely did an assertive woman appear in the Gothic novel. Signora Laurentini of Udolpho is one example of a wicked, manipulative woman, but she dies in an agony of didactic repentance:

. . . the first indulgence of the passions; beware the first! Their course, if not checked then, is rapid--their force uncontrollable--they lead us we know not whither.¹¹

The Gothic heroine provides only a focus for persecution; the real moving force of the Gothic novel is the villain:

The hero-villain of Gothic fiction is a two-sided

¹¹ Mrs. Anne Radcliffe, The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) (London: J.M. Dent, 1962), p. 318.

personage, a figure of great power, latent virtue, and personal magnetism tragically stained by criminality. . . . he is a person whose evil is the result of a clash between his passionate will and the unnatural restraints of convention. ¹²

Hero-villains such as Lewis' Ambrosio (The Monk, 1796) and Mrs. Radcliffe's Schedoni (The Italian, 1797) are presented in moral rebellion against authoritarian tradition, yet guiltily aware of their evil. Melmoth (Melmoth the Wanderer, 1820) has sold his soul for forbidden powers; he roams the world delighting in the torment of others yet strangely sympathetic in the presentation of his own suffering. These characterizations are obviously in debt to Marlowe's Dr. Faustus; they share the divided nature of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and his monster, and the Byronic heroes of the Romantic period; and they embody the fascination with moral ambiguity which was to outrage the conservative reader of sensation fiction in the 1860s.

The sensation novel owed a lot to the conventions of the Gothic novel, particularly as those conventions were appropriated and exploited by the popular stage melodrama. This dramatic form appeared simultaneously on French and English stages in the 1790s, the same years that gave rise to the rage for Gothic literature. As the later sensation novel was to provide "light" reading for the middle and upper-middle classes, the enormous popularity of the melodrama was due to the entertainment and emotional outlet it provided for a huge urban

¹² William F. Axton, Introduction to Charles Maturin, Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, Press, 1961), p.x.

working-class audience for whom few other leisure activities were available. It was not until the 1860s and '70s that melodrama began to attract the more sophisticated upper-class patron.¹³

The melodrama repeated the Gothic novel's cast of rigidly-defined characters closely contained in an overall framework of dramatic action. Both literary forms can be traced back to the fifteenth-century morality play with its simplified allegorical types and heavy emphasis on mime to express emotion and meaning. The exaggerated gestures we have come to associate with imploring heroines and rejecting fathers are typical conventions of the stage melodrama carried over into Victorian fiction. In David Copperfield (1850), for example, Dickens provides the memorable tableau in which Agnes indicates Dora's death by standing silently, finger upraised and pointing to Heaven. In the melodramatic confrontation between Edith Dombey and Carker (Dombey and Son, 1848) there is a monotonous dependency upon physical appearance and gesture to express Edith's emotional state. Her eyes are "fierce," "dark," and "flashing"; they "gleam strangely" and "sparkle fire." She looks at Carker with the "inflated nostril" and "swelling neck" which indicate her "indomitable spirit." She holds her hand up "like an enchantress." This description of a tragedy queen is captured in the "Phiz" illustration of the scene entitled "Mr. Carker in

¹³ Michael Booth, English Melodrama (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), pp. 52-56.

his Hour of Triumph."¹⁴ As late as 1900 the poster of an East Lynne touring company reproduced the "body language" of the imploring heroine: Lady Isobel on her knees, arms upraised in supplication to an implacable and unbending Archibald. No caption is necessary but one is provided. Predictably it reads: "ARCHIBALD, will you not BLESS me before I die?"¹⁵

The Gothic novel had embodied in its archaic setting a sense of the obsolescence of the old order; and the rebellious villain had suggested how those outmoded institutions imprisoned the human spirit. So in the melodrama a strong anti-aristocratic attitude prevails, reflecting the social unrest of the times--the French Revolution, the American War of Independence and the Napoleonic Wars. The Industrial Revolution heralded the assault of the lower and middle classes upon the landed aristocracy for a share of economic, social and political power. Translating these rebellious tendencies into entertainment for an urban working-class audience, the domestic melodrama explored the values of the family in conflict with an unfeeling and aggressive representative of industrialized society in ways that deeply involved the audience--often in the form of a rich landlord threatening a poor family with eviction. The persecution usually took the form of the sexual harassment of a

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son (1848) (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), Ch. LIV. The illustration faces page 760.

¹⁵ M.M. Maison, "Adulteresses in Agony," The Listener, 19 Jan. 1961, p. 133.

young, pure and often motherless heroine, upon whose tender shoulders the security of the family rested. What suspense is generated, usually resides in the question of whether or not she will allow the villain to "have his way with her" and thus save the family home. However, her sense of self-sacrifice rarely extends this far and the efforts of the hero (well-meaning if somewhat inept), assisted by the heroine, finally effect the release of the family.¹⁶

The real function of the melodramatic heroine (aside from shedding a beneficent influence upon all who came in contact with her), was to suffer; and the capacity of these heroines for suffering was extraordinary. Nevertheless, when necessary, they could call upon seemingly bottomless reserves of strength to resist and defy their sexual oppressors, only to sink back into a profound passivity once each crisis had passed. This was still a reliable recipe in the Victorian novel; Collins wrote in The Law and the Lady: "Only give a woman love and there is nothing she will not venture, suffer, and do" (V, 18). It is not surprising, therefore, that while the melodrama appealed to the poor in general, it had a particular appeal for women. As threatened domesticity was at the heart of the later sensation novel, so it provided the focus for passion and pathos in the domestic melodrama. Of necessity the stories usually centered on

¹⁶ In this connection it is interesting to note that Douglas Jerrold's melodrama "The Rent Day" (1832) was inspired by a painting, "Rent Day" by Sir David Wilkie, R.A., a close friend of William Collins, Senior. William Wilkie Collins was to become this gentleman's godson.

the woman who was trying to hold things together. It exalted the sacrifice of her well-being for the benefit of others. In the dramatization of female sacrifice and renunciation, women found acceptable outlets for their repressed abilities and were able, at least vicariously, to prove their real worth and value to others, in particular their influence for good in the lives of men.

When the absolute moral values of the Gothic novel and the melodrama were applied to a social and legal system of increasing complexity, a confusion of ethics was inevitable. The cape-swirling villain of the Gothic novel and the moustache-twirling landlord of the melodrama made way for the more complex hero-villain of the "Newgate" novel of the 1830s and '40s. These stories of prison and gallows were written by men--Bulwer, Dickens, Ainsworth--and about men--Paul Clifford, Eugene Aram, Jack Sheppard. But although the Newgate novel centered on men, men with power, freedom and physical strength to undertake daring escapades, the books introduced a more fully-developed hero, one who recognized the societal and environmental influences which had formed him. Drawing on the folk traditions surrounding such adventurers as Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, the Newgate novel produced a kind of "Robin Hood" hero, at ease with the aristocracy and beloved by the rabble. Bulwer went even farther with Paul Clifford (1830). He was fascinated with the criminal mind and realized that his audience could be made to feel at once the "horror of the crime, yet

compassion for the criminal."¹⁷ This set the scene for a drama of tension between society and the individual:

I come into the world friendless and poor--I find a body of laws hostile to the friendless and poor! To those laws hostile to me, then, I acknowledge my hostility in my turn. Between us are the conditions of war.¹⁸

Forty years later, in The New Magdalen (1873), one of Collins' characters echoes Paul Clifford: "I deny that I have done wrong. Society has used me cruelly; I owe nothing to society. I have a right to take advantage of it, if I can" (X, 418). In Collins' novel, however, the speaker is a woman; the anti-hero has become an anti-heroine.

Thus the villain, conventionally depicted as one who is perversely unwilling to make the assertion of will necessary to abstain from evil-doing, becomes society's underdog, and, as such, is entitled to a measure of sympathy and understanding. In Oliver Twist (1838) we see this happening in the case of the murderer Bill Sykes at bay after Nancy's death, and in Fagin passing his last night within "those dreadful walls of Newgate": "Strike them all dead! What right have they to butcher me?" Readers revel in the unflagging defiance of the Dodger: "I wouldn't go free now if you was to fall down on your knees and

¹⁷ Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer, The Critical and Miscellaneous Writing of Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1841), I, p. 61.

¹⁸ Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer, Paul Clifford (1830) (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1867), p. 132.

ask me. Here, carry me off to prison!"¹⁹ Presumably this effect was not what Dickens had originally intended. His ostensible object was to embody in Oliver Twist a protest against the criminal-heroes of the Newgate novel. A disclaimer in the preface to the 1841 edition states that the author wishes to show "the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last."²⁰

Thackeray also recognized and deplored the tendency to romanticize villainy. In Catherine (1840), his parody of the Newgate novel, Thackeray advises authors:

. . . let your rogues in novels act like rogues, and your honest men like honest men; don't let us have any thimble-rigging with virtue and vice, so that at the end of three volumes, the bewildered reader shall not know which is which.²¹

Yet Thackeray himself professed "a sneaking kindness"²² for Becky Sharp, the calculating adventuress of Vanity Fair (1848). How far he succeeded in making right and wrong clear to the bewildered reader of that novel is suggested by a Quarterly Review article of December, 1848: "With few exceptions, the personages are too like our every-day selves and neighbours to

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (1838) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 300, 363.

²⁰ Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. lxii.

²¹ W.M. Thackeray, Catherine (1839), Works (London: Smith Elder, 1869), Vol. X, p. 33.

²² W.M. Thackeray, The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray, ed. Gordon N. Ray, (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), I, 433.

draw any distinct moral from. We cannot see our way clearly."²³ For in Vanity Fair Thackeray juggles with virtue and vice to the extent that this "novel without a hero" becomes a novel with a heroine, and that heroine confessedly "no angel." Courageous, alone, a victim of social injustice, Becky Sharp focusses Thackeray's speculations upon the nature of virtue; but his conclusions are unclear. Happy endings elude the grasp of both the unscrupulous Becky and the ideal wife-mother Amelia. Ironically, Amelia's negative qualities obscure the issue, and the reader is left to ponder the moral and philosophical implications of her final disenchantment. Thus it appears that both Dickens and Thackeray subscribe emotionally to the romance of rebellion against convention; neither is entirely successful in suppressing a sense of "sympathy with sin."

II

In spite of the critical scorn poured upon their novels, the sensationalists were best sellers; The Woman in White was printed seven times in six months. But the fact that Victorian readers enjoyed a contemporary story set in familiar domestic surroundings, and that they displayed a surreptitious "sympathy with sin," does not entirely account for the popularity of the sensation novels of the 1860s. In "The Death and Rebirth of the

²³"Vanity Fair--Jane Eyre," The Quarterly Review, (Dec. 1848), p. 156.

Novel" Leslie Fiedler states:

. . . the machine-produced commodity novel is, therefore, dream-literature, mythic literature, as surely as any tale told over the tribal fire. Its success, too, depends on the degree to which it responds to the shared dreams, the myths which move its intended audience.²⁴

Perhaps one must look to the daily lives of Victorian readers for the rest of the answer.

Urban middle-class Victorians needed an escape from the pressures and anxieties of an increasingly complex life. Technological advances produced tediously repetitive and exhausting work for the lower and middle classes. Urban crowding encouraged the rapid expansion of suburban housing developments lacking the sense of community which had bound men to their rural neighbours. Descriptions of such treeless, monotonous and rubble-strewn estates are a common feature of Collins' novels. In 1849 the Collins family moved into Blandford Square, a newly-developed area which appears as "Baregrove Square" in Hide and Seek (1854). Collins describes its "unspeakable desolation of aspect":

Baregrove Square was the furthest square from the city, and the nearest to the country, of any then existing in the north-western suburb of London. . . . Whatever dismantled castle, with the enemy's flag flying over its crumbling walls, ever looked so utterly forlorn as a poor field-fortress of nature, . . . with the conqueror's device inscribed on it--"THIS GROUND TO BE LET ON BUILDING LEASES," . . . the mournful sight of the last tree left standing, on the last few feet of grass growing, amid the greenly-festering stucco of a finished

²⁴ Leslie Fiedler, "The Death and Rebirth of the Novel," The Theory of the Novel, ed. John Halperin (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 191.

Paradise Row, of the naked scaffolding poles of a half-completed Prospect Place? It was just the sort of place where the thoughtful man . . . would be prone to stop suddenly and ask himself . . . "Do these people ever manage to get any real enjoyment out of their lives from one year's end to the other?" (XI, 32-33, 38)

At the same time, religious doubt eroded childhood faith and optimism, producing feelings of isolation and uncertainty. Boredom, exhaustion, poverty, pessimism--all of these aspects of the nineteenth century urban scene combined to diminish the stature of the individual and to add to his sense of powerlessness and frustration.

In addition, prudish convention narrowed the lives of the middle-classes, many of whom welcomed a vicarious release from the stultifying respectability of their days. The sensation novel added a touch of emotional transcendence, albeit often at a vulgar and Technicolour level, but nonetheless one that liberated the reader, particularly the female reader, from an unvarying and empty daily routine. Miss Braddon admitted that she wrote for "the circulating library and the young ladies who are its chief supporters";²⁵ Mrs. Oliphant described novels, suggestively, as "precious to women and unoccupied persons."²⁶ In Man and Wife (1870) Sir Patrick Lundy comments: "You are suffering, Blanche, from a malady which is exceedingly common among the young ladies of England. As a disease it is quite

²⁵ Robert Lee Wolff, "Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862-1873," Harvard Library Bulletin, XII (April, 1974), p. 150.

²⁶ Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," Blackwood's Magazine, CII (Sept. 1867), p. 257.

incurable--and the name of it is Nothing-to-Do" (III, 569).

Girls who would have needed smelling salts to recover from the sight of a run-over puppy relished the gory details of the sensation novel. Women for whom flight was an impossibility thrilled to the thought of midnight escapes through London streets in hansom cabs. In the sensation novel, "fleeing, not always strictly necessary to the plot, was very popular."²⁷

The stage melodrama presented a simplified and idealized world which dealt not with the possible, but with the desirable; thus it provided an escape into fantasy for its audience. And so it was with the sensation novel. As Lily Dale says in The Small House at Allington (1864): ". . . a novel should tell you not what you are to get, but what you'd like to get . . . real life is sometimes so painful."²⁸ Collins recognized the desire for escape, but he preferred to look at it from another angle: "Not one man in ten thousand," he wrote, "living in the midst of reality, has discovered that he is also living in the midst of Romance" (XXV, 13). In his lengthy and somewhat pretentious Preface to Basil, he propounded this theory and defended the sensation novel against its detractors:

Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow toward heaven by taking root in earth. Is not the loveliest poetry of

²⁷ Guinevere Griest, Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 130.

²⁸ Anthony Trollope, The Small House at Allington (1864) (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 163-4.

prose fiction the poetry of everyday truth? . . .
Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters
in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama
narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all
the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is
privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to
excite also, I have not thought it either politic or
necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to
everyday realities only. (X, 3-5)

This is substantially the same theory as that espoused by
Charles Reade when he describes his novel Hard Cash (1863) as "a
matter-of-fact Romance, that is, a fiction built on truths."²⁹
Collins underlined these ideas about the romance of reality by
subtling Basil, a story of secret marriage, seduction, and
violent death on the Cornish cliffs, simply "A Story of Modern
Life." The Evil Genius (1886), a novel concerning a man's
adultery with his daughter's governess, his divorce from, and
eventual remarriage to, his wife, is merely subtitled "A
Domestic Story." Undoubtedly Collins was ahead of his time.
Charles Dickens expressed the same sentiment about the romance
of everyday life in his introduction to Bleak House (1853),
stating: "In Bleak House I have purposely dwelt upon the
romantic side of familiar things."³⁰ When one recalls that
Dickens is here referring, among other things, to Krook's
explosive death by "internal combustion," one realizes the
liberties sensation novelists were willing to take with the word
"familiar." Collins justified the exploitation in his novels of

²⁹ Charles Reade, Preface to Hard Cash, (1863) (Boston: James E. Osgood, 1871), n.p.

³⁰ Charles Dickens, Bleak House (1853) (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xiv.

the improbable and the coincidental (not to say the incredible) by suggesting that "those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to a few men seem to be as legitimate material for fiction . . . as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all" (X, 5).

Needless to say, novel-reading as an essentially escapist activity was seen as subverting the Victorian ideal of strict adherence to "realism," the Gradgrind world of absolute fact: "We are by no means rigorous in expecting that the story is to move along the highway of everyday life," wrote George Henry Lewes. "If we are to travel into fairy-land, it must be in a fairy equipage, not a Hansom's cab."³¹ The predilection of the sensation novelist for cabs upon all occasions must have been a continual thorn in the flesh of such readers. Fortunately Lewes did not survive to be outraged by that inveterate user of hansom cabs, Sherlock Holmes.

In a Household Words article entitled "A Petition to the Novel Writers," Collins dismissed objections to the novel:

. . . dull people decided years and years ago . . . that novel-writing was the lowest species of literary exertion, and that novel-reading was a dangerous luxury and an utter waste of time. . . . Our object is to waste our time, mis-employ our intellects, and ruin our morals: or in other words, to enjoy the prohibited luxury of novel-reading. ³²

In the library at Windygates (Man and Wife, 1870) are shelves of

³¹ G.H. Lewes quoted in Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850-1870 (New York: Columbia, 1961), p. 184.

³² Wilkie Collins, "A Petition to the Novel Writers," Household Words, 6 Dec. 1865, pp. 481-2..

" . . . Solid Literature, which is universally respected and occasionally read" and other shelves containing " . . . Light Literature, which is universally read and occasionally respected" (III, 258). The room is furnished accordingly:

While a row of luxurious arm-chairs . . . invited the reader of solid literature to reveal himself in the act of cultivating a virtue, a row of snug little curtained recesses . . . enabled the reader of light literature to conceal himself in the act of indulging a vice. (III, 259)

In The Moonstone (1868) Collins answered the sneers of those who maintained that the novel was definitely Not Art, with the sarcastic comments of Ezra Jennings who describes classical literature as "immeasurably superior to anything produced in later times, and . . . possessing the one great merit of enchaining nobody's interest and exciting nobody's brain" (VII, 109).

The distinction between the classical treatment of crime and its treatment by contemporary sensation novelists was made by Henry James:

Crime, indeed, has always been a theme for dramatic poets, but . . . its dramatic interest lay in the fact that it compromised the criminal's moral repose. . . . With Mr. Collins and Miss Braddon . . . the interest of crime is in the fact that it compromises the criminal's personal safety.³³

If by his phrase "interest of crime" James means "what interests us about the criminal and his crime," then it seems to me that James is not quite correct here in regard to Collins, although I would agree with him in reference to Miss Braddon. Lady Audley

³³ James, "Miss Braddon," p. 123.

embarks upon her murderous career in order to protect her affluent social position. When Robert Audley becomes suspicious, her personal safety is compromised, and the reader's interest is then focussed upon the detective's pursuit of his prey.

In the case of Collins' novels, however, the "interest of crime" is more complex. The most that we can find to say about the minor villains like Ablewhite (The Moonstone) and Glyde (The Woman in White) is that they don't interest us much one way or another. But in the latter novel, what is it that interests us so strangely about Count Fosco? I suggest that whether or not he gets caught is of little importance to the reader. Marian Halcombe's diary details the personal magnetism of the man; his challenging opinions stimulate the reader. The result is that the pages upon which Fosco appears are the most interesting and entertaining in the book; and if today's jaded reader can find Fosco refreshing, how much more he must have appealed to readers at the time of the book's publication.

It never occurs to us that Collins' villains may get caught. With Horatio Wragge and Magdalen Vanstone (No Name) the game's the thing; any criminality that is involved is forgotten under the spell of Wragge's silver-tongued rhetoric. Unquestionably Miss Gwilt is wicked; but the "interest of crime" in Armadale is, again, in the villainess herself, and in her determination to live a life in which concessions to either respectability or convention play little part.

Thus in Collins' novels the "interest in crime" is in the criminals themselves and the vicarious pleasure that the reader experiences in watching conventional morality defied and set at naught. The difference between Braddon's Lady Audley and Collins' villains and villainesses is that we are shown nothing of Lucy Audley's mind; she is passive until threatened; then like a child, she strikes out at random to protect herself. Collins' criminals are complex characters to whose personalities we are irresistibly drawn.

III

Collins' decision to become a writer rather than an artist was not made until the publication of Antonina in 1850. In the previous year the Royal Academy Exhibition accepted his submission of a landscape, but subsequently hung the painting high up near the ceiling. This led the artist to suspect that his painting had been accepted more out of respect for his father than because of the picture's inherent excellence. In later years Collins made sarcastic comments to this effect when his friends noticed "The Smuggler's Refuge" hanging in his study.³⁴ The painting has since disappeared.

However, Collins' brother Charley (Charles Allston Collins, 1828-1873) did become an artist and an intimate of the

³⁴ W. Holman Hunt, Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1905) (New York: AMS Press, 1967), II, 187.

Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Evenings at Mrs. Collins' home near Regent's Park found the Collins brothers, the Rossettis, William Frith, John Everett Millais, Augustus Egg, and W. Holman Hunt filling the drawing-room with cigar smoke. Wilkie fancied himself a sophisticate and a cosmopolitan; he affected Bohemian tastes in food, wine and dress: "He would sit down to dinner in a light camel hair or tweed suit," wrote Frank Beard in his reminiscences, "with a broad pink or blue striped shirt, and perhaps a red tie."³⁵

In 1851, a mutual passion for the theatre and an introduction by Augustus Egg brought Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens together. Collins' irreverent attitude and skeptical view of Victorian proprieties appealed strongly to Dickens. The friendship prospered and was to last for twenty years. Dickens at 39 was at the height of his literary powers and a brilliant social success. He found Collins' company refreshing and relaxing, and often invited the younger man to accompany him on his midnight rambles around London: ". . . on Wednesday," he wrote to Collins in May of 1857, "if the mind can devise anything sufficiently in the style of sybarite Rome in the days of its culminating voluptuousness, I am your man. . . . If you can think of any tremendous way of passing the night, in the meantime, do. I don't care what it is. . . ." ³⁶

³⁵ Frank Beard, "Some Recollections of Yesterday," Temple Bar, 102 (1894), p. 321.

³⁶ Charles Dickens, The Letters of Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, ed. E.L. Hutton (New York: Haskell House, 1974), pp. 81-82.

Collins could hardly help coming under the influence of the Inimitable, particularly as Dickens soon conscripted him as a regular contributor and staff member of Household Words. Much ink has flowed upon the subject of the amount and kind of influence each writer had upon the other;³⁷ certainly they had characteristics in common. G.K. Chesterton suggests that Dickens' magazines were important for two reasons: first, for Dickens own contributions to them, and secondly:

. . . for the fact that . . . he made one valuable discovery. He discovered Wilkie Collins. Wilkie Collins is the one man of unmistakable genius who has certain affinity with Dickens; an affinity in this respect, that they both combine a modern and Cockney and even commonplace opinion about things with a huge elemental sympathy with strange oracles and spirits and old night. . . . No two men would have more contempt for superstitions; and no two men could so create the superstitious thrill.³⁸

In the late 1860s Dickens and Collins became estranged; but ironically, at the time of his death, Dickens had embarked upon The Mystery of Edwin Drood, a novel containing a number of Collinsian elements. Collins, meanwhile, had abandoned the carefully plotted tale of mystery and detection in favour of the novel of social protest, a literary form for which, sadly, he had little flair.

36 (cont'd)

37 see Sue Lonoff, "Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins," Nineteenth Century Fiction, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Sept. 1980), pp. 150-170.

38 G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London: Methuen, 1928), p. 163.

Collins was not a highly-educated intellectual as was George Eliot; he was a member of the urban middle-class and as such possessed a fairly prosaic outlook. His writing lacks the mystical intensity of the Brontes and the depth of humour and sensitivity that Dickens was able to bring to social commentary. Unfortunately, it is against Dickens' success with social themes that Collins is usually measured and found wanting. Collins held strong views on certain subjects, but his feelings are best expressed in neat epigrammatic phrases. For example, in The Moonstone the county member "grows hot" about the spread of democracy: "If we lose our ancient safeguards, . . . what have we got left?" he asks. Franklin Blake retorts: "We have got three things left, sir--Love, Music, and Salad!" (VI, 117) Beyond this, Collins' social criticism degenerates into laboured sarcasm which fails either to enlighten or amuse.

Like Dickens, Collins wrote for the common man. He publicly scorned the literary critic, but he felt his limitations severely in comparison with his famous friend and was extremely sensitive to suggestions that his books were less "important" than Dickens', that is, that they were less effective as social criticism. This led to the humptious self-congratulatory quality that so irritated his friends at the height of his success; perhaps understandably, he gave himself too many hearty pats on the back. Writing to his mother about the soaring sales of The Woman in White, he exulted:

The other day I reckoned up what I have got for it thus far. One thousand four hundred pounds--with the

copyright in my possession, and the disposal of all editions under the extravagant guinea and a half price in my hands. Cock-a-doodle-doo! The critics may go to the devil--they are at the book still as I hear, but I see no reviews.³⁹

However, while he may have dismissed the critics lightly, Collins took every opportunity to stress to his readers the skill and perseverance involved in writing his kind of fiction. The narrator of Queen of Hearts (1859), labouring over his writing, comments:

It is not wonderful that the public should rarely know how to estimate the vast service which is done to them by the production of a good book, seeing that they are, for the most part, utterly ignorant of the immense difficulty of writing even a bad one. (XIV, 64)

There is no question that painstaking effort paid off for Collins. As well as bolstering his position as a serious writer, his technique of strict adherence to realism in every detail of the plot established his credibility and predisposed his readers to accept the author's more astonishing flights of fancy. Collins had a passion for the kind of documentation with which the sensationalists armed themselves against charges of improbability. Professional men, particularly doctors and lawyers, abound in the novels. In Man and Wife, for example, Lady Lundie's "composing draught" is analyzed for us down to the drams and ounces, and the prescription provided complete with instructions in English and Latin (IV, 61). Armadale's Dr. Ledoux explains how his chemical apparatus operates to produce a lethal gas that will eventually asphyxiate Miss Gwilt (IX, 517).

³⁹ Kenneth Robinson, Wilkie Collins (London: The Bodley Head, 1951), p. 147.

A prefatory note to Heart and Science provides evidence from The Times and Chambers' Encyclopaedia to support Mrs. Gallilee's research into the "Diathermancy of Ebonite" and "the idea of atoms" (XXV, 10). In line with the increasing specialization of the metropolitan police, (the detective department was created in 1842), Collins provides a fully-fledged detective, Sergeant Cuff, to assist in the search for the missing gem in The Moonstone. In Man and Wife Collins interrupts the narrative with two pages detailing the contents of the Report of the Royal Commissioners on the Laws of Marriage (1868). This digression begins: "NOTE:--There are certain readers who feel a disposition to doubt Facts, when they meet with them in a work of fiction" (III, 327-8). With Collins, readers do this at their peril!

His insistence upon accurate detail makes Collins' slip-up over the date upon which Lady Glyde leaves Blackwater House in The Woman in White all the more surprising. An astute Times reviewer noted the blunder in his column of Oct. 30, 1860, and Collins responded at once:

If any fresh impression of The Woman in White is likely to be wanted immediately, stop the press till I come back. The critic in The Times is (between ourselves) right about the mistake in time. Shakespeare made worse mistakes--that is one comfort. . . . Nevertheless we will set it right at the first opportunity.*0

The corrections were incorporated in subsequent editions.

Throughout the novels, passages of great descriptive power provide reminders of the artistic environment in which Collins

*0 Norman Page, ed., Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 95.

grew up, and of the continuing influence of Charley and his Pre-Raphaelite circle. Collins' familiarity with landscape painting is displayed in the evening scene on the Norfolk Broads which forms the background for the first appearance of Miss Gwilt, the eerie "shivering sands" in The Moonstone, the pre-dawn silence that precedes Allan Armadale's dream, and the famous meeting of Walter Hartright with "the woman in white," a scene which Dickens described as one of the two most dramatic moments in English literature.*¹ A favourite of mine is an interior setting from Basil which must surely have been retained in Dickens' memory, resurfacing years later in his description of the Veneerings in Our Mutual Friend (1865). This passage is given particular impact by the surreal effect of the last sentence:

Everything was oppressively new. The brilliantly varnished door cracked with a report like a pistol when it was opened; the paper on the walls with its gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground, looked hardly dry yet. . . . Never was a richly-furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this--the eye ached looking round it. There was no repose anywhere. The print of the Queen hanging lonely on the wall, in its heavy gilt frame, with a large crown at the top, glared on you: the paper, the curtains, the carpet, glared on you: the books, the wax-flowers in glass cases, the chairs in flaring chintz covers . . . all glared on you. There was no look of shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in any one nook or corner of those four gaudy walls. All surrounding objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were. (X, 89-90)

*¹ Robinson, p. 149. Dickens paired this scene with that of the march of the women to Versailles in Carlyle's French Revolution.

As a novelist, Collins is generally considered to lack skill in the delineation of character. Here again he suffers in the inevitable comparison with Charles Dickens; yet Collins created some very successful characters. The sensation novel, however, exploited fast-paced action, suspense, and complex plotting at the expense of character development. Heavily plot-centered books like The Woman in White and The Moonstone of necessity direct their reader's interest away from the characters and focus it on the denouement. No Name and Man and Wife are not so dependent on intricacies of plot, but, while they contain interesting character studies in the Wragges, Magdalen Vanstone and Hester Dethridge, the themes of the books suffer more from the author's intellectual limitations, and from the inevitable effect of social change upon the tastes of the reading public. Another factor which undermines the effectiveness of character in such novels as The Woman in White and Armadale, is the enervating presence of the fatality theme, the "Design that is yet unseen" which leads to the "inevitable end" (I, 414). Miss Gwilt and Count Fosco are the only characters who seem able to manipulate events at will, but even they are not proof against Love which proves to be Miss Gwilt's Nemesis, and Vengeance which is waiting in the wings for the Count.

The innovative narrative styles within which Collins unfolds his complex plots can also result in a lack of focus on character. This is not always the case, however. In Armadale it is Miss Gwilt's diary which exposes the "stream" of her

consciousness. Without the diary and her voluminous correspondence, we would understand little of what goes on in Lydia's mind. However, in The Woman in White and The Moonstone Collins devised a series of first-person narratives, each of which conveys the truth from one viewpoint and all of which converge at the climax of the story. While this results in the whole truth being withheld from the reader until the end of the story and greatly adds to the interest and suspense of the novel, it also necessitates removing characters from the action for long periods of time: Walter Hartright disappears for almost half of The Woman in White and Godfrey Ablewhite is kept out of sight for most of The Moonstone. This technique results in distancing the reader from characters who are, in effect, the "hero" and "villain" of the two novels, respectively.

While the disjointed and rambling Gothic tale of terror, the picaresque "Newgate" novel and the early books of Dickens all cry out for Collins' skill in knitting together character and plot, contemporary critics were not always impressed with his consummate plotting skill. Anthony Trollope, while an admirer of Collins' novels, commented that he never could "lose the taste of the construction."⁴² But that Collins was able to construct his intricate plots while at the same time coping with the exigencies of serialization and the debilitation of chronic "rheumatic gout," is a remarkable achievement. Much of The

⁴² Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 184.

Moonstone was dictated from his bed while Collins' was suffering from an excruciating attack of "gout of the eyes," although the author had first to fire several secretaries who allowed themselves to be distracted from their work by his cries of pain. In order to obtain some relief from his suffering, Collins took large doses of opium. Commenting on the composition of the book, he later wrote: "When it was finished, I was not only pleased and astonished at the finale, but did not recognize it as my own."³

One important aspect of Collins' writing which drew the fire of critics and conservative readers was his casual treatment of conventional morality. In Basil the hero puts his ear to the wall of a cheap rooming-house, and eavesdrops upon his wife's seduction by her father's clerk:

I listened; and through the thin partition I heard voices--her voice and his voice. I heard and I knew--knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror. (X, 216-7)

In the early '50s ~~this~~ this was pretty hot stuff. Collins explored sexuality in its various forms--seduction, adultery, bigamy, prostitution--the effects of these upon the inviolable domestic circle, and the rehabilitation of the fallen woman in respectable society. The mere preservation of the heroine's chastity, her escape from "a fate worse than death" which had been the point at issue in the Gothic novel and the melodrama,

³ Mary Anderson (de Navarro), A Few Memories (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1896), p. 143. But see also Lonoff, Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers, p. 171, for manuscript evidence which disputes Collins' story.

was superseded by a confrontation of heroine and villain which no longer rewarded the purity of the former while punishing the villainy of the latter. In essence what Hardy called "moral obliquity"⁴⁴ became the mainspring of the sensation novel. This state of affairs drew the self-righteous fire of the New York Daily Tribune critic:

. . . if [Collins] means to say that society, organized on virtuous principles, ought to accept reformed courtesans as wives and mothers, and place them on the same footing with women of unblemished purity, he announces a doctrine that is false in itself, and that may prove pernicious in its results.⁴⁵

Exactly why this doctrine is "false in itself" is left unexplained by the writer. Unfortunately, this kind of smug "cant" always succeeded in raising Collins' hackles; in the Preface to Basil he defended the book against charges of immorality:

Nobody who admits that the business of fiction is to exhibit human life, can deny that scenes of misery and crime must, of necessity, while human nature remains what it is, form part of that exhibition. Nobody can assert that such scenes are unproductive of useful results when they are turned to a plainly moral purpose.
(X, 6)

Nevertheless, plenty of people did assert just this.

There is no question that alleviating the "painfulness" of life--the tedium of the middle-class woman's day and the narrow experience of the respectable businessman--without offending the sensibilities of the reader, was difficult. The sensationalists

⁴⁴ Thomas Hardy, Prefatory Note to Desperate Remedies (1871) (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. v.

⁴⁵ Robinson, p. 269.

tried to deal with this problem by distancing the villain and the villainess from the audience. It was easier for an insular English audience to appreciate the fiendish Count Fosco and accept his unpalatable comments on English social hypocrisy because of his Italian background. The Victorian middle-class would have agreed with Miss Mitford's father that "abroad was bloody"; thus, Fosco is acceptable as a typical expatriate of a country filled with sinister Catholics and hysterical music-lovers. Lydia Gwilt's confessions in Armadale would hardly have been acceptable had she confided them in the novel directly to a respectable woman over the tea-table. Yet the reader could relish Lydia's wicked disclosures when presented with them second-hand, reading the diaries and letters, as it were, over the villainess' shoulder.

Kept at a comfortable distance from the audience, the villain and villainess are seen as alien beings, isolated by their wicked and willful refusal to conform to the accepted standards of society, representatives of which constitute the reading audience. After all, if the villain is too obviously a social victim, the reading audience is clearly culpable and must accept some guilt for the villain's development. Thus Dickens wisely stops short of actually accusing and berating his audience (a crime of which Collins was too often guilty) and merely appeals rather vaguely to the better natures of his readers. On behalf of the dead Jo in Bleak House, for example, he makes a poignant appeal:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.⁴⁶

What blame is discernible here is directed toward the aristocratic and clerical establishments. The ordinary reader is tacitly assumed to be on the side of the angels (and the author) and is thus relieved of responsibility. Protest in Dickens is primarily expressed in these compassionate urgings, while Collins in his later novels often subjects his readers to irritating harangues which interrupt and detract from the forward movement of the plot.

In the novels of the '60s, Collins managed to subordinate his social commentary to the plot. But the charges of immorality and "prurience," although energetically refuted by the author, nevertheless had a lasting and deleterious effect upon the natural expression of Collins' talent. His desire to vindicate his books' "usefulness" to his critics, and the influence of Dickens' novels of social purpose, led to an unhappy emphasis upon "protest" in Collins' novels, particularly those written after 1870.

Of course there had always been an element of social protest in Collins' work. His books express an undeniably jaundiced view of the world he lived in, one which contrasts with Dickens' more optimistic pleas for benevolence as a universal panacea. Collins' outlook is deeply pessimistic: "Does it ever strike you," asks the Doctor in The Legacy of Cain

⁴⁶ Dickens, Bleak House, p. 649.

(1888), "when your cat is catching its mouse, and your spider is suffocating its fly, that we are all . . . born to one certain inheritance--the privilege of eating each other?" (XVI, 33)

One way in which Collins expresses social criticism is in his almost obsessive preoccupation with society's outcasts--the handicapped, fallen, insane, dispossessed--all those individuals whom society has abandoned and who are helpless to assert their needs. Collins' novels are peopled with these isolates: blind Miss Finch, retarded Ariel, hunchbacked Rosanna Spearman, and mad Hester Dethridge are only a few. Their crippled bodies and minds seem to symbolize for Collins a diseased society which has lost touch with the individual. Hester Dethridge (Man and Wife), for example, is a victim of society's refusal to protect her from the abuse and persecution she suffers at the hands of her husband. Hester's situation finally drives her mad; she murders her husband, paradoxically finding her inspiration in the Bible.

Collins' pessimism is also expressed in bitter attacks upon snug Victorian complacency, the "canting hypocrisy" that Fosco constantly derides. By 1860 Collins had reached middle-age and the changing times were a source of bitterness and confusion for him as for other Victorians. The author's uneasiness manifests itself in his novels, filling them with ambiguities and unresolved conflicts. His characters voice these contradictions; the youthful express contempt for convention and respectability and the mature resent new-fangledness in general. The novels express the tensions of the author's world, an unstable world in

which the confident assumptions of Victorians are challenged. Hard work and enterprise may not result in success and happiness. As Fosco suggests, crime may pay. The instruments of social good, instead of supporting the individual, may in fact persecute him. This is the assumption underlying No Name, The Law and the Lady and The Woman in White: the law is not merely an ass; it has become an agent of evil.

When this happens, enterprising and courageous people behave criminally in order to circumvent the law; like Magdalen, they risk losing respectability in order to gain it. When it becomes acceptable for people to use each other for financial and social gain, the travesty of the "marriage market" results. In No Name, her parents' common-law relationship is a "real" marriage in the sense that Magdalen's legal marriage with Noel Vanstone is not. Although Basil's marriage is kept secret from his family, he does behave honourably in marrying Margaret. Nevertheless, the marriage brings Basil nothing but misery. It outrages his father's pride, and astonishes his brother, who is horrified that Basil should have married a draper's daughter instead, presumably, of merely seducing her: "I've spent time very pleasantly among ladies of the counter myself. But . . . I'm told that you actually married the girl!" (I, 346). Ralph avoids his father's wrath by merely keeping a mistress. The collapse of respectable domestic relations is a particular subject of Collins' as it is of other sensation novelists.

The property-conscious society of the first half of the century was undergoing change and the sensation novels of the sixties were responsive, at least to some extent, to the changing world. In No Name a society in which possessions are all-important is exposed as a "prosperity of fools" at the mercy of intelligent but unscrupulous tricksters like Wragge who "understand the world [they] live in" (XI, 454). Collins himself, in his experiences with publishers, was under no illusions about the dog-eat-dog world of business. A New York publisher sold 126,000 copies of The Woman in White: "He never sent me sixpence," remarked the author.*7 Collins, an astute businessman who was tireless in his crusade for reciprocal copyright agreements between countries, refused to compromise his writing on behalf of timid publishers: "Mr. Turlington must talk like Mr. Turlington--even though the terrible consequence may be that a boy or two may cry 'Damn' in imitation of him. . . . In short I'm damned if I take out damn!"*8 In reply to a request from C.E. Mudie, the strict Nonconformist proprietor of Mudie's Circulating Library, that Collins change the title of The New Magdalen, the author stoutly refused:

Nothing will induce me to modify the title. His proposal would be an impertinence if he was not an old fool.

. . . . But the serious side of this affair is that this ignorant fanatic holds my circulation in his pious hands. Suppose he determines to check my

*7 Robinson, p. 146.

*8 Ibid., pp. 232-3.

circulation--what remedy have we?⁴⁹

The coexistence in Collins of what Fosco calls "the Man of Sentiment and the Man of Business" (II, 357) seems an odd blend of the rational and the romantic, but it was probably a common enough product of the times. The conservative part of Collins' nature leaned toward personal comfort and domestic stability in the face of social change and decay. This longing manifests itself in Collins' inability to allow his resolute heroines to escape the confines of respectable domesticity at the end of their adventures, whether or not that particular kind of "happy ending" seems poetically just. He expresses his rebellious tendencies in acid social comment, a contempt for everything English and a penchant for everything French, particularly French novels and French champagne. But, above all, Collins' "sympathy with sin" is expressed in his sympathetic treatment of the charming rogue and the fascinating villain.

⁴⁹ Griest, p. 75.

CHAPTER 2

Collins' Male Characters

I am bewitched with the rogue's company. If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged.

Shakespeare, I Henry IV

I

In the Gothic novel and the stage melodrama it is the villain rather than the hero who holds the center of interest and provides most of the dramatic action. Compared to major Gothic hero-villains like the tragic Melmoth and the darkly sensual Ambrosio, however, the villain of the stage melodrama is essentially a one-sided figure. His familiar "Curses! Foiled again!" hardly seems an adequate comment as one contemplates the relentless determination with which his villainous efforts are thwarted and baffled by the forces for Good--the Chastity of the Heroine and the Integrity of the Hero. Nevertheless, the villain's sheer persistence in the face of constant frustration at least engages our interest and merits our admiration. The accepted form of the melodrama dictated that the action was

contained within a well-defined framework. The audience's knowledge that the odds were stacked against the villain from the start encouraged a degree of sympathy with his defiant efforts; no matter how brilliantly he schemed, ultimately Good would triumph over Evil.

In the sensation novel as in the melodrama and the Gothic novel, the villain retains the spotlight. In his early books, Collins utilized three villains of the recognizably melodramatic type: Robert Mannion (Basil), Sir Percival Glyde (The Woman in White), and Godfrey Ablewhite (The Moonstone), although Ablewhite is kept very much in the background as the plot of the novel develops and thus plays a relatively minor role compared to the other two. Nevertheless he shares a one-dimensional quality with Mannion and Glyde; like them he is totally without humour and like them he dies a violent death.

In typical melodramatic fashion, Basil presents a weak, relatively uninteresting hero, Basil, and a declamatory and malevolent villain, Mannion. The latter is a less sinister version of the confidential business partner who attempts to insinuate himself (literally) into the bosom of the family in Dickens' David Copperfield and Dombey and Son. He schemes to seduce Basil's wife, Margaret, in revenge for the ill-treatment his father received years before at the hands of Basil's father. Basil has added insult to injury by marrying Margaret, the object of Mannion's lust, thus intensifying Mannion's desire for revenge. However Mannion's role is weakened when Margaret turns

out to be almost as nasty a piece of work as her seducer, and quite willing to acquiesce in adultery with him. Aside from this, Mannion's debts to Dickens' Heep and Carker are obvious.

Sir Percival Glyde, the minor villain of The Woman in White, is a classic example of the sneering aristocrat of the melodrama. He is pitted against Walter Hartright, another weak hero who is only slightly more interesting than Basil. It seems highly unlikely that the cynical Collins could have been entirely serious in endowing his hero with a name like "Hartright," but whether or not this was the case, the opposition of Glyde (too Bad) and Hartright (too Good) is only slightly more successful than that of Basil and Mannion.

Neither Mannion nor Glyde engage the reader's interest because each is essentially a cardboard figure exhibiting no complexity of mind or emotion. Both suffer from a kind of tunnel-vision which expresses itself in a determined and self-defeating malignancy. In addition, both are upstaged (although this is more obvious in Sir Percival's case) by other more interesting characters: Basil's roguish brother Ralph, and Sir Percival's flamboyant mentor, Count Fosco. Thus Collins abandons the clearly-defined roles of hero and villain, adding complexity by introducing characters in whom good and bad qualities are variously mixed. The roles of these anti-heroes are less easy to define; the men are rebellious and magnetic, amoral and charming; but above all, they are vital. Collins' rogues and his master-criminal are always entertaining; their

creator's affection for them is obvious.

Basil contains ingredients of the stage melodrama other than the wicked seducer and the well-meaning but ineffectual hero. The novel also offers a harsh, authoritarian parent and a passive, pure woman, Basil's "good angel" sister, Clara. Following melodramatic tradition, Basil is a rigidly moral story in which punishments are meted out to the offenders with ruthless efficiency. The unpleasant Margaret, for example, contracts typhus and dies, while Mannion is so savagely beaten by Basil that he is rendered both blind and unrecognizable. What raises the novel above the level of mere melodrama is the presence in it of Basil's charming brother Ralph, the family black sheep, and the cold, egocentric Margaret, Collins' first attempt at a villainess. But the critics failed to be appeased by the prompt punishment of vice. Collins' depiction of sexual passion unredeemed by romantic sentiment, Mannion's cold-blooded seduction of Margaret, and her apparently complaisant and unemotional betrayal of her husband, caused the kind of outrage expressed by this anonymous reviewer in a Westminster Review article of Oct. 1853:

The incident which forms the foundation of the whole, is absolutely disgusting; and it is kept so perseveringly before the eyes of the reader in all its hateful details, that all interest is destroyed in the loathing which it occasions. . . . There are some subjects upon which it is not possible to dwell without offence. . . .¹

¹ Norman Page, ed., Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 52.

This criticism refers particularly to the relatively explicit language quoted earlier which describes the adultery between Margaret and Mannion as overheard by Basil. However criticism was also directed at Basil's brother Ralph, a character repugnant to Victorian sensibilities; he lives openly and cheerfully with his mistress and makes no secret of his past indiscretions.

Ralph is a cheerful profligate whose delightful dialogue is by far the most natural and convincing in the book, and in its own way as good as anything Collins ever did. Ralph lives with "the morganatic Mrs. Ralph," and considers his brother hopelessly naive. Nevertheless, he shoulders Basil's problems (at the same time underlining the hero's ineptitude) and goes out to do battle with Basil's father-in-law:

"Ah, yes! I see: the old story--innocent of course. And her father backs her, doesn't he? To be sure! That's the old story, too. . . ."

.
"Give me the name and address . . . I shall ask my father for money for myself, and use as much of it as I think proper for your interests. He'll give me anything I want, now I've turned good boy. I don't owe fifty pounds, since my last debts were paid off--thanks to Madame, who is the most managing woman in the world. Bye the bye, when you see her, don't seem surprised at her being older than I am. Oh! this is the address, is it? Hollyoake Square? Where the devil's that? Never mind: I'll take a cab, and shift the responsibility of finding the place on the driver!" (I, 347, 350)

Ralph is also capable of standing up to their blustering father.

He describes the interview to Basil:

"Sir," said I, very politely, "if you mean to make a cursing and swearing conference of this, I think it only fair to inform you beforehand that you are likely to get the worst of it. When the whole repertory of British

oaths is exhausted, I can swear fluently in five foreign languages; I have always made it a principle to pay back abuse at compound interest; and I don't exaggerate in saying, that I am quite capable of swearing you out of your senses, if you persist in setting me the example."
(X, 359)

In his disregard for convention, his "gift of the gab," his determination to take care of number one, and, above all, in his air of effervescent joie de vivre, Ralph is the forerunner of Count Fosco and Horatio Wragge.

In The Woman in White, Collins achieves the epitome of "sympathy with sin" in the brilliant creation of Count Fosco. Fosco is a fascinating amalgam of wickedness and wit; his performance completely upstages that of his petulant partner Sir Percival Glyde. Collins brings his arch-villain to the novel from Italy, the land of Udolpho: "I thought the crime too ingenious for an English villain, so I pitched on a foreigner," he wrote some years later.² However, it is not for any real or imagined wrong inflicted upon him by society that Fosco engages our sympathy. It is his utter contempt for conventional ideas of virtue, his total lack of conscience and his rationalization of evil into a delightful game that merits our reluctant admiration. Fosco's personal magnetism, which rises at times to hypnotic power, arouses a "strange half-willing, half-unwilling liking" (I, 336); it counteracts his grotesquerie and contributes a sinister dimension to the characterization. Marian

² Wilkie Collins, "Collins on the Composition of The Woman in White," The World (26 Dec., 1877), pp. 4-6, reprinted in The Woman in White, ed. Harvey Peter Sacksmith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 591.

notes this quality in her diary:

They are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw; and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them, which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel. . . .

I know he flatters my vanity . . . and yet, when I go down stairs, and get into his company again . . . he can manage me . . . as he manages the blood-hound in the stable yard. . . . (I, 328-9, 335)

There is such a dramatic quality to Fosco's characterization that the man seems always to be performing. In fact, the scene in which Fosco is confronted by Hartright is a natural for the stage:

"Miss Halcombe. Just Heaven! with what inconceivable rapidity I learned to adore that woman . . . My wife --poor angel!--my wife, who adores me, got nothing but the shillings and the pennies. Such is the World; such Man, such Love. What are we (I ask) but puppets in a show-box? Oh, omnipotent Destiny, pull our strings gently! Dance us mercifully off our miserable little stage!"

Fosco's histrionic delivery might have detracted from his credibility if it were not so firmly wedded to his contemptuous scorn of the conventional "cant" that Collins himself so abominated:

"Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it? . . . there are foolish criminals who are discovered and wise criminals who escape. . . . When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police, in nine cases out of ten, win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly-intelligent man, the police, in nine cases out of ten, lose. If the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own Detection!" (I, 351-2)

Fosco's villainy is partly offset by this tendency of the author

to use him as a mouthpiece for witty and astringent pronouncements upon the hypocrisy and sentimentality of Victorian society: "[Fosco's] theories concerning the vulgar clap trap, that murder will out, are my own," Collins wrote when commenting on the composition of the novel.³

Horatio Wragge, the con-man par excellence of No Name is an equally successful, although much lower key characterization. Fosco and Wragge share some characteristics: both are fluent and amusing talkers who have little time for the bland mouthings of conventional society; both use their intelligence to defraud their fellow-men. But beneath Fosco's smiling exterior lurks a villain, while Wragge, for all his extravagant impudence, is a compassionate man; at least he has the vestiges of a conscience:

Magdalen looked at him in surprise. He spoke in altered tones. He was agitated; he was strangely in earnest. . . . "Damn it!" he broke out; "I can't let you say that. You have reason to think ill of me. I have cheated you . . . You have laid a hold on me that I don't quite understand. I'm half uncomfortable at taking the money from you now. . . ." (XIII, 158-9)

Apart from these lapses, however, Wragge is presented with his professional charm intact, a likeable rogue with the zest for life common to all Collins' anti-heroes:

"I am a Rogue; and, in that capacity (as I have already pointed out), the most useful man you possibly could have met with. Now observe! There are many varieties of Rogue; let me tell you my variety, to begin with. I am a Swindler . . . Definition: a moral agriculturalist; a man who cultivates the field of human sympathy . . . one of these days . . . the abstract merits of the profession now called swindling will be recognized . . . Here lies Wragge; . . . he plowed, sowed and reaped his

³ Ibid., p. 592.

fellow creatures; and enlightened posterity congratulates him on the uniform excellence of his crops." (XII, 302-5)

In this novel the allocation of heroic and villainous qualities is more complex than in The Woman in White. In that novel, the victim of the conspiracy, Laura Fairlie, while somewhat colourless, is at least a pleasant gentlewoman. In No Name the man conspired against is pictured devoid of any sympathetic qualities. A querulous invalid, Noel Vanstone is greedy, stupid and weak-willed into the bargain. Thus in No Name Collins neatly turns the tables on the convention of hero versus villain. Wragge, a confidence trickster who connives to cheat Noel Vanstone out of his fortune and marry him unawares to a woman who loathes everything about him but his money, is presented, if not as a hero, at least as a kind and likeable fellow. Noel Vanstone, who in his innocence is imposed upon by not only Wragge and Magdalen, but also the domineering Mrs. Lecount, is an almost totally unsympathetic character.

The character of Wragge seems to me the happy result of a particularly productive period in the Collins-Dickens friendship. Although Collins had by this time resigned from the editorial staff of All the Year Round (the successor to Household Words), he and Dickens continued to collaborate on such Christmas stories as "A Message From the Sea" (1860), about which Collins wrote:

It is amusing to see reviewers point out a passage of mine as an example of Dickens' peculiar vein, and in the next sentence comment on a paragraph of Dickens' as a

sample of Wilkie Collins' sensational style.⁴

Wragge's characteristics--breezy cynicism, kindness, humour, and a definite tendency to self-dramatization--exhibit a blend of the Dickensian and the Collinsian.

In The Moonstone (1868) Collins' sleight-of-hand with heroic and villainous characteristics is again apparent. Godfrey Ablewhite, deeply involved in Humanitarian Good Works, turns out to be a villain and a hypocrite. Franklin Blake, who has all the qualities of the hero--confidence, wealth, good looks, charm--appears to be guilty of theft and hypocrisy. The heroine, Rachel Verinder, loves him for the former qualities and heartily despises him for the latter. Ablewhite steals Rachel's jewel, the moonstone. Albert Hutter suggests that what is stolen from Rachel is "both the jewel and her symbolic virginity,"⁵ and this suggestion dovetails nicely with Ablewhite's later exposure as a betrayer of women generally:

The side kept hidden from the general notice exhibited this same gentleman in the totally different character of a man of pleasure, with a villa in the suburbs which was not taken in his own name, and with a lady in the villa, who was not taken in his own name, either. (VII, 163)

Franklin Blake's conduct, however, is shown to be questionable as well: "I expect some imprudence of Mr. Franklin's on the Continent--with a woman or a debt at the bottom of it . . . ,"

• Robinson, p. 158.

⁵ Albert D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications for Detective Fiction," Victorian Studies, (December, 1975), p. 201, and see also Charles Rycroft, Imagination and Reality (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), pp. 116-122.

Betteredge speculates (VI, 96). There are further implications of seduction in Rosanna Spearman's removal of the stained nightshirt from Blake's bedroom and her recorded impressions:

. . . "I said to myself 'Here's proof that he was in Miss Rachel's sitting-room between twelve last night, and three this morning.' I shall not tell you in plain words what was the first suspicion that crossed my mind, when I made that discovery." . . . (VI, 520-1)

Thus good and bad appearances are traded back and forth at different times throughout the story. Both Ablewhite and Blake are guilty of incurring debts in connection with sexual misconduct. In order to keep financially afloat, Ablewhite first embezzles money and then attempts to marry Rachel for her fortune. Blake, on the other hand, allows Rachel's mother to pay his debts, and then marries Rachel. The villainous Ablewhite dies, murdered for the possession of the moonstone, symbol of Rachel. The heroic Blake lives happily-ever-after in possession of the real woman. The reader is somewhat blinded to the moral ambiguity here by Collins' partiality to Blake, a partiality implicit in dialogue which immediately announces Blake's kinship to his cheerfully unrepentant predecessor, Ralph:

"Rachel's conduct is perfectly intelligible, if you will only do her the common justice to take the Objective view first, and the Subjective view next, and the Objective-Subjective view to wind up with. . . . Rachel, properly speaking is not Rachel, but Somebody Else. Do I mind being cruelly treated by Somebody Else? . . . Then how does it end? It ends, in spite of your confounded English narrowness and prejudice, in my being perfectly happy and comfortable. Where's the sherry?" (VI, 288-9)

An examination of Collins' anti-heroes exposes a fascinating interplay of guilt and innocence. His sinners gain

our sympathy in various ways. Usually the reader's attention is directed toward some attractive or admirable quality which mitigates the character's sin to some extent; for example, Fosco admires the excellent Marian, Ralph takes care of his brother and Wragge accepts responsibility for his docile but simple-minded wife. Moreover, the author attributes unattractive qualities to characters like Mr. Fairlie (The Woman in White), Noel Vanstone (No Name), and Miss Clack (The Moonstone), characters who, while technically blameless, lack tolerance, humour and compassion. They are apportioned the guilt and blame which should, in narrow moral terms, be carried by Ralph, Wragge and Blake, all of whom admittedly do not adhere to the sexual and moral standards of their society.

Only Collins' meaner villains are punished without delay. Ablewhite, who exemplifies humanitarian hypocrisy masking moral decay, Glyde, who represents the decadent aristocracy, and Mannion, all meet violent deaths. Death also overtakes the flamboyant Fosco, but both his murder and the motive for it are distanced from the immediate action of the novel. The unscrupulous Wragge, far from suffering for his crimes, appears to go from strength to strength in the confidence game. Both Ralph and Blake seem content with the paths they have chosen, whether inside or outside the bounds of respectable convention. Collins' technique of employing his anti-heroes as social critics does much to rehabilitate them in the eyes of the reader. Wragge, Ralph, Blake and even the wicked Fosco, are all

utilized to convey their creator's views on the hypocrisy and intolerance inherent in the rigid and narrow moral code adhered to by respectable Victorian society.

In all of this Collins diverges from the uncompromising moral scheme to which his friend and mentor Charles Dickens was committed. Dickens has less propensity for the complex and sympathetic anti-hero, and tends to cling more closely to the clear-cut roles of the melodrama. His villains are closer in conception to Mannion, Glyde and Ablewhite, particularly in the direct relationship Dickens establishes between crime and its punishment. Heep, Carker, the obsessed Bradley Headstone, and even mere moral weaklings like Wrayburn and Carton all suffer punishments--injury, imprisonment or death. Another way in which Dickens' sinners contrast with Collins' is that their criminal activities seem less imaginative. Like Fosco, both Heep and Carker seek money and power; yet neither seems able to think of any original way to achieve his ends. Like most of Dickens' sinners, they find it difficult to extend their imaginative range beyond seduction. Perhaps it is this lack of creative challenge--the zest that Fosco and Wragge display for the game--that creates the most noticeable difference between Dickens' and Collins' sinners. Ralph, Wragge and Fosco all display a convincing, if cynical, enjoyment in being at odds with society. Although Carker and Heep appear to derive some kind of gratification from the contemplation of their victim's misery, none of Dickens' sinners gets much fun out of life.

Wrayburn, Carton and Steerforth seem always burdened by a sense of guilt and disquiet. Dickens never created an anti-hero with the disarming personal charm of Collins' rogues or his master criminal, Fosco.

Because of his propensity for the entertaining anti-hero and the relatively uninteresting hero, Collins' novels display a lack of right-minded and vital young men. When male opinions are expressed with vehemence and vigour on behalf of traditional morality, the speaker is usually an irascible elderly man in a minor role: Gabriel Betteredge (The Moonstone), Sir Patrick Lundy (Man and Wife), Mr. Clare (No Name), Mr. Pedgift, Sr. (Armadale), Old Benjamin (The Law and the Lady). The opinions of these older men are expressed from the other side of the generation gap that separates them from the younger anti-heroes. All are critical of the "new ideas" and represent the paternal wisdom of the older generation. They are utilized to express the conservative part of Collins' nature that opposed the change and decay which he saw all around him as he moved into middle age. Nevertheless, these characters play only supporting roles, and, while they provide an interesting counterpoint to the rebellious tirades of the anti-heroes, it is obvious where Collins' major allegiance lies. From Ralph, the likeable rake, descends Wragge, the loveable rogue and Blake, the reformed roue. Even Fosco, the only real villain of the four, is invested with such vitality by his creator that it is hard to believe that Collins was not his most ardent admirer:

"Third question. On a calm revision of all the circumstances--Is my conduct worthy of any serious blame? Most emphatically, No! Have I not carefully avoided exposing myself to the odium of committing unnecessary crime? . . . At immense personal sacrifice, I followed the dictates of my own ingenuity, my own humanity, my own caution, and took her identity instead. Judge me by what I might have done. How comparatively innocent! how indirectly virtuous I appear, in what I really did!" (II, 365)

It is interesting to speculate upon the origins of Collins' devil-may-care attitude, the amused acceptance with which he views his hero-villains. Collins lived with his widowed mother and his brother Charles until 1860 when Charley married Kate Dickens (Dickens' younger daughter) and moved out. He appears to have been involved in some emotional entanglement in the early '50s about which nothing is known, but which apparently formed the basis of the plot of Basil (1852): "I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge," he wrote in the novel's Preface (I, 3). The tone of the novel suggests that the experience was an unhappy one for Collins; however, it is the only suggestion of any emotional attachment up to his thirty-fifth year. Indications are that in 1859 or 1860 he met the mysterious "woman in white," Carolyn Graves, with whom he was to live, except for a brief period, for the next thirty years. This relationship was established before, and continued after his acquisition of a second mistress, Martha Rudd, by whom Collins had three children. The extreme unconventionality of Collins' life after leaving home suggests either extremely strongly-held convictions or very deep disturbance of some kind.

It is perhaps idle to speculate upon whether or not Collins' undoubted attachment to his mother disinclined him toward marriage. In his fondness for the "loveable rake," he may have seen himself as always faithful to his mother, although occasionally a "naughty boy." Certainly he was in no way dependent upon his mother's presence; he loved to travel and often spent weeks and months living and travelling with Dickens, always maintaining a steady correspondence with his mother and brother. Collins' predilection for strong women in his novels, and his refusal to marry either of his two long-term mistresses, may reflect a fear of the threat such women posed to his relationship with his mother. Interestingly, one of Collins' early short-stories, "The Dream Woman" (1859), depicts just this situation.

"Unlucky Isaac" lives until age thirty-eight with his widowed mother. Spending a night away from home at an inn, he awakens, terrified by the sight of a knife-wielding, "fair, fine woman with yellowish, flaxen hair" who attempts to stab him, and failing, disappears. Returning home, he describes the appearance of the dream woman to his mother in detail. After seven years absence, Isaac returns to his mother's house, and the same evening meets the dream woman in the flesh. He does not recognize her, but feels vaguely uneasy in her presence. She fascinates him, however, and they plan to marry; but she warns him to keep their relationship secret from his mother. When the two women finally meet, Isaac's mother points out that the real

woman perfectly matches Isaac's description of the dream woman. From this time the mother's health fails, and Isaac takes upon himself the guilt for her suffering. She pleads with him not to return to his wife. Finally the dream occurs in real life; Isaac awakens to find his wife standing over him, knife upraised. He overpowers her and leaves her that night. She disappears, but Isaac, "withered and old-looking before his time," never sleeps again at night, and is haunted by the fear of his wife's finding him: "She's looking for me" becomes his watchword (XIV, 132-169).

All of this is, of course, the merest conjecture. It may be that flouting marital convention enhanced Collins' rebellious self-image and satisfied a desire for attention from his mildly Bohemian social circle. The fact remains that the one character completely missing from Collins' novels (and from those of Dickens') is the strong and confident hero who is also genuinely good. No Felix Holts or Daniel Derondas stalk the novels, serenely self-righteous mentors of aspiring heroines. In responding to what Leslie Fiedler calls the "shared dreams" of their audience,⁶ the sensation novelists abandoned the lover as counsellor: "I care for myself," Jane Eyre asserts. "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. . . . Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations are all I have at this hour to stand by;

⁶ Leslie Fiedler, "The Death and Rebirth of the Novel," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 191.

there I plant my foot."⁷ The sensation novelist carried this resolution and the self-denial it represented a step further. They recognized that the guiding paternal hand lay heavy on women, married and unmarried. Many desired to cast it off, at least vicariously, and to abandon self-sacrifice even in a noble cause: "Jane Eyre's Mr. Rochester!" exclaimed a sensation heroine of 1865, "If I had been Jane Eyre, I would have killed him!"⁸

II

The melodramatic hero was an outgrowth of the "verray parfit gentil knight" of medieval romance: brave, courteous, good, but unfortunately, because of the absolute purity of his thoughts, unable to foresee or forestall the evil machinations of the villain. Thus the knight-in-shining-armor was in a fair way to be made a fool of:

Brave this hero must always be and strong and kind, but it was unfortunately difficult for him to be wise, as the burden of troubles it was necessary to load upon this poor man's shoulders . . . would never have been carried by anyone but a terrible sap.⁹

"Terrible sap" is, of course, hardly a fair description of Walter Hartright, Collins' major candidate for the role of

⁷ Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre (1847) (Harmondsworth, Sussex, England: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 314.

⁸ Florence Lean, Love's Conflict (1865) in Victorian England in its Novels: 1840-1870, ed. Myron Brightfield (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), I, 167.

⁹ Booth, English Melodrama, p. 17.

traditional hero. However, while Hartright's name signals his heroic function, Collins' presentation of his hero suggests that "Hartright" may have ironic overtones. Hartright's introduction to the reader is not impressive; his health is poor, physically and mentally: he seems a man incapable of managing his own affairs:

. . . the failing summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and, if the truth be told, out of money as well. During the past year, I had not managed my professional resources as carefully as usual; and my extravagance now limited me to the prospect of spending the autumn economically. (I, 8-9)

The tone of self-reproach and dejection here contrasts sharply with the confidence and swagger of Ralph, Wragge, Fosco and Blake, all of whom need cash and expect to get it without "limiting their prospects" in any way.

Hartright accepts a position as drawing master at Limmeridge House and promptly falls in love with his pupil, Laura Fairlie. His hopes are dashed, however, when Marian Halcombe informs him that his beloved is betrothed to another man. In this first crisis with which Hartright must cope, his behavior is far from conventionally heroic:

The pang passed; and nothing but the dull numbing pain of it remained. I felt Miss Halcombe's hand again, tightening its hold on my arm--I raised my head and looked at her . . . the strength of her will--concentrated on the look she fixed on me, and in the hold on my arm that she had not yet relinquished--communicated to mine, steadied me. We both waited a mute moment in silence. At the end of that time I had justified her generous faith in my manhood; I had, outwardly at least, recovered my self-control. (I, 105-6)

Halfway through the novel Marian collapses and Hartright returns

to continue the battle on Laura's behalf. At the culmination of his efforts, he beards the villain Fosco in his den. Even here, however, the typical melodramatic interaction of weak hero and strong villain is evident. Although Hartright finally achieves the upper hand with Fosco and demands of him a signed confession of the conspiracy, it is Fosco who controls the interview, displaying what even Hartright admits is "an extraordinary mixture of prompt decision, far-sighted cunning and mountebank bravado. . . . Sincerely as I loathed the man, the prodigious strength of his character, even in its most trivial aspects, impressed me in spite of myself" (II, 331, 334). In this way Hartright, nominally at least the hero of the novel, is deprived of heroic stature from beginning to end of the book. He is never as satisfactory an antagonist to Fosco as is Marian Halcombe.

If the Victorian self-image is that of the diminished hero, Collins' novels expose it with a vengeance. Not only do the books lack heroic male roles, but at the same time they contain devastating studies in male weakness and ineptitude. As mentioned above, other than the anti-heroes and Fosco, any male characters with sense are old and powerless. Though youthful, men like Allan Armadale, Noel Vanstone, and Eustace Macallan lack brains, moral and physical strength, and vitality. Even the supposed heroes--Hartright, Midwinter and Blake--exhibit a recognition that they are powerless and overwhelmed at the hands of unknown and malignant forces.

While Fosco, always in control of events, enjoys pretending that he is buffeted by fate, Ozias Midwinter actually allows himself to be possessed and controlled by Allan Armadale's dream, the fulfillment of which constitutes the entire forward movement of the plot of Armadale:

"Thrice the Shadows of the Vision warned Allan in his sleep," [Midwinter] went on, "and thrice those Shadows have been embodied in the after-time by You and by Me! . . . For this, your influence drew me to you, when my better angel warned me to fly the sight of your face. There is a curse on our lives! there is a fatality in our footsteps." (IX, 384-5)

One way to cope with loss of control is to abandon oneself to fate. If events are foreordained, one is absolved of responsibility for one's actions and for the future. Collins constantly employs the finger-of-fate motif, usually involving carefully stage-managed coincidences and dream fulfillments, utilizing his talent for what Dorothy Sayers termed "combining melodrama with calculation."¹⁰ At the same time, responding to the anxiety produced by the instability of his world, Collins' plots tend towards the solution of problems; they restore identities, find patterns and reorder chaos. They all move toward the stability of the conventional happy ending.

To reconcile these two aspects of his novels, Collins' characters must become instruments of fate, chosen (somehow, by someone) to effect predestined ends. In The Woman in White, for example, when Marian despairs of her efforts to help Laura, she receives a message in a dream from Hartright:

¹⁰ Sayers, Milkie Collins, p. 25.

The night when I met the lost Woman on the highway was the night which set my life apart to be the instrument of a Design that is yet unseen. . . . I am still walking on the dark road which leads me to you, and the sister of your love and mine, to the unknown Retribution and the inevitable End. (I, 414)

Hartright does perform some conventional heroics in his fight with Glyde's bullies and his final showdown with Posco. However, events beyond his control finally defeat Glyde, and Posco manages to orchestrate his own capitulation, again taking the triumph out of Hartright's hands. Midwinter is more passive than Hartright. He allows a fatal dream to take control of his life and order his actions. Franklin Blake goes one step further and performs his conscious desires in an entirely unconscious state. Under the influence of opium he acts without volition, a sleepwalker in a dream:

The sublime intoxication of opium gleamed in his eyes; the dew of a stealthy perspiration began to glisten on his face . . . he sat up in bed. . . . The pupils of his eyes were now contracted; his eyeballs gleamed in the light of the candle. . . . He looked about the room, with the vacant glitter in his eyes. . . . The next moment he passed us, swift and noiseless with the candle in his hand . . . He put the candle on top of the cabinet. Then he took the mock Diamond out with his right hand. (VII, 115-120)

The very inability of Collins' heroes to control their own destinies contributes to our impression of the heroes of the books as irresolute and devitalized, as submerged in the plots rather than as controlling events. What male vitality exists is provided by rogues, villains, and madmen, for here one must include Miserrimus Dexter, an absorbing study in abnormal psychology and a character who provides The Law and the Lady with its only strong male character. Dexter, a legless

megalomaniac, totally eclipses the feeble Eustace Macallan, the "heroic" object for whose rights Valeria so successfully campaigns. Mannion, Dexter and Fosco are the only men in the novels who exercise real mastery, both mental and physical, over women. In Man and Wife Collins asserts that this mastery is essential to a woman's happiness:

However persistently the epicene theorists of modern times may deny it, it is nevertheless a truth in the whole past history of the sexes that the natural condition of a woman is to find her master in a man. . . . The possession of a master is--unconscious to themselves--the only possible completion of their lives. (III, 481-2)

Collins asserts that women want and need to be subjugated by their husbands and lovers; yet he places that mastery only in the hands of the obsessed Mannion, the ruthless Fosco and the unstable Dexter. Mannion states of his plan to gain control over Margaret Sherwin:

I said within myself: . . . I will know happiness before I die; and this girl shall confer it. . . . she shall come to my side, and of her own free will put her hand in mine, and follow me wherever I go: my wife, my mistress, my servant, which I choose. . . . Her strong passions?--I could control them. Her obstinacy?--I could break it. Her poverty of intellect?--I cared nothing about her intellect. What I wanted was youth and beauty. . . . (I, 315, 320)

In Fosco the quality surfaces when he cows the mastiff by sheer force of will. We see it also in the mesmeric power with which he commands the baffled submission and reluctant admiration of Marian Halcombe:

He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married me, . . . I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds

hers. (I, 326-7)

Marian continues, describing Fosco's control over his wife: "The rod of iron with which he rules her never appears in company--it is a private rod, and always kept upstairs" (I, 334).

In Dexter the same power exists, this time exercised by the mentally unbalanced over the mentally defective; but the submissive quality and the sexual overtones inherent in Ariel's responses to him are the same:

"Ariel! you have learned to dress my hair and anoint my beard, haven't you? . . . Would you like to let anybody else do it for you?" . . .

"Let her try!" cried the poor creature, raising her voice again to its hoarsest notes. "Let her touch you if she dares!"

Dexter laughed at the childish outbreak. . . .

"I thought my little experiment might interest you," he said. . . . "The dormant intelligence of my cousin is like the dormant sound in a musical instrument. I play upon it--and it answers my touch. She likes being played upon."

"Poor devil!" he said patting her head complacently. "You don't understand, do you? And yet I can make the flesh creep on your great clumsy body--and yet I can hold your suddled mind, and make you like it. Poor devil!" He leaned back serenely in his chair, and looked my way again. (V, 284-5, 449)

"Mastery" then is a quality Collins claims for his heroes but demonstrates only in the villainous Hannion and Fosco and the half-mad Dexter. Wragge, of course, controls Mrs. Wragge, but the sexual element is missing here and the situation degenerates into comedy. Franklin Blake claims mastery over Rachel: "My touch seemed to have the same effect on her which the sound of my voice had produced when I first entered the room . . . while her hand lay in mine I was her master still!" (VI, 565) However, given the context of their stormy interview, his

claim seems more optimistic than convincing. Hartright, having employed Marian to propose to her sister on his behalf, continues to lean heavily on her for support; Midwinter is totally under the spell of Miss Gwilt; and Eustace Macallan's petulant demands of the capable Valeria (The Law and the Lady) can hardly be described as masterful in any sense. Collins, at once threatened and fascinated by strong women, can conceive of a liaison with such a woman only in traditional terms of male mastery and female submission; yet the relationships in his novels hardly bear out his theory.

The men in Collins' novels express the weakened paternalism of the mid-nineteenth century. The elderly men in the novels embody Collins' desire to assert order through traditional authority and his powerlessness to do so in the face of accelerating social change. His younger but devitalized men and his weaker melodramatic villains express various aspects of Collins' social criticism. Collins' meaner villains die violent deaths. His master-criminal, Fosco, is also eventually killed, but for earlier crimes and in a foreign country. Ralph and Wragge flourish, the former happily living in sin and the latter unrepentantly and even more successfully cultivating his human crops. Under a good woman's influence, Franklin Blake is well on his way to becoming a reformed character.

One of Collins' most welcome contributions to the development of the more psychologically-true character, was in the creation of the profligate with the heart of gold. Like

Thackeray's Becky Sharp, Collins' anti-heroes are not angels but they are survivors. The reader is compelled to sympathize with sin when it is embodied in sinners who radiate a most seductive personal charm, who lay a tenacious hold on life and display such zest for the ride. In creating characters like Wragge and Ralph, Collins effectively released the hero from his strait-jacket of virtue and established a more credible and complex foil for the resolute heroine. And just in time. For in the search for new directions and fresh material, novelists were re-discovering the heroine. Traditionally good, beautiful, chaste, vulnerable--she was the obvious candidate for rehabilitation.

CHAPTER 3

Women and Sensation Fiction

The Heroine, the whole Heroine, and nothing but the Heroine--that is our cry, if you drive us into the corner and insist on our stating precisely what we want, in the plainest terms possible.

Wilkie Collins, "A Petition to the Novel Writers"

I

With the publication of Collins' The Woman in White in 1860 and Mrs. Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret in 1862, the resolute heroine moved into the spotlight of "popular" literature. Lady Audley and Marian Halcombe could hardly have been more different, but readers received them both with enthusiasm. Lady Audley pursues her own ends, ruthlessly; Marian risks all for her sister, willingly. At first glance the destinies of the two women seem equally at variance. Lady Audley, incarcerated in an asylum, is forced to renounce the world outside. However, Marian Halcombe's future role as maiden aunt in the Hartright household and "sister" to Walter Hartright seems also to involve a certain amount of renunciation.

In mid-nineteenth century there were no completely satisfactory solutions for the capable woman who did not marry; and solutions were needed. The problem was not one that was going to go away. The publication in 1847 of Jane Eyre had a

revolutionary effect on the Victorian heroine. Many later heroines pursued self-fulfillment; they were rebellious, passionate, and often, as in the case of Marian Halcombe, plain. Whereas Jane Austen's heroines painfully acquire self-knowledge and George Eliot's reluctantly practise self-denial, the sensational heroine was self-assertive, determined upon freedom from restraint and triumphant survival. The fact that so many sensational heroines survived their adventures only to be safely delivered into the waiting arms of husbands and lovers, reflects a realistic assessment on the part of the novelist of the existing possibilities for women, rather than a denial of early feminist stirrings. Taken as a whole, the sensation novel reflects the beginning of a movement toward the liberation of women from their limited sphere and the emancipation of the heroine from her traditional role.

The rise of interest in the post-Jane Eyre heroine encouraged many middle-class women to experiment with novel-writing. In this activity they found an outlet they were otherwise denied. Unfortunately, few women were the intellectual equals of George Eliot, and many wrote sensational pot-boilers for the mass market. This exploitation of the elements of the sensational novel as a formula for the outpourings of inferior writers, most of them women, was one reason for the decline of sensationalism at the end of the decade. "Serious" authors were quick to disclaim any "sensational" tendencies in their novels. Sheridan Le Fanu, for example, insisted that his novels belonged

to the "legitimate school of tragic English romance"¹ (my underlining). Miss Braddon stated, "Wilkie Collins is assuredly my literary father,"² yet Henry James considered that she, and not Collins, was the founder of the sensation novel. In James' opinion, Collins' works "deserve a more respectable name."³ Even Charles Reade qualified the use of the term "sensation novelist" as applied to himself:

This slang term is not quite accurate as applied to me. Without sensation there can be no interest; but my plan is to mix a little character and a little philosophy with the sensational element.*

Collins deprecated the female writers; he felt that they lowered the prestige of "light literature" and it is true that much of the female output was trash. Although Collins himself, in later years, was responsible for some pretty silly books, he considered his own novels and those of his friends Dickens and Reade to be greatly superior to the work of the female novelists, and to a great extent history has vindicated his opinion. While the best-selling novels of 1860-62 were Collins' The Woman in White, Dickens' Great Expectations, Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne and Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret, only the

¹ Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, "A Preliminary Word," Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh (1864) (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. vii.

² Robert Lee Wolff, Sensational Victorians: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), p. 324.

³ James, "Miss Braddon," p. 123.

* Charles Reade, Preface to Hard Cash, n.p.

former two books are still read. The novels of Reade are at least available in second-hand bookstores, but the best books of Wood and Braddon are increasingly difficult to find. At the time, however, the enormous sale of East Lynne amazed and enraged Collins, and in The Black Robe (1881) he was still venting his feelings about women writers:

"A very remarkable work, Stella, in the present state of light literature in England--a novel that actually tells a story. . . . It has another extraordinary merit--it isn't written by a woman." (XIII, 328)

Nevertheless even Collins could not deny that women and sensation were inseparable. In fact, by the 1860s, fiction, as Mrs. Gaskell said of Cranford, was "in possession of the Amazons."⁵

It was not the low literary level of the sensation novel that drew the fire of conservative readers, however. It was the fact that dubious morality pervaded the novels, and that these "prurient" books were produced by women writers for the apparent enjoyment of other women:

. . . the writers of these books, ay, of the very roulest of them,--authors who have put forth confessions of the darkest profligacy that an utter reprobate could make, . . . these writers are, some by their own admission . . . women; and the worst of them, UNMARRIED WOMEN.⁶

A Punch cartoon of 1867 shows a man inspecting the new book offered to him in a book-shop, and declaring: "Ah, very clever,

⁵ Mrs. Gaskell, Cranford (1853) (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. 1.

⁶ Quoted in Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 160-161.

I dare say. But I see it's written by a Lady, and I want a Book that my Daughter may read. Give me something else."⁷

One characteristic of the sensation novel which particularly attracted female readers and writers was its preoccupation with the exposure of secrets. Secrecy was part of the life of all middle-class Victorians, but was particularly basic to the lives of women. The most important functions of their bodies--menstruation, sexual intercourse, conception and how to avoid it, childbirth, menopause--events governing the lives of women of all ages, were unmentionable secrets shared only between intimate female friends. It is not surprising that the secrets most often exposed in the sensation novel concern unlawful passion--adultery (particularly that involving the flight from husband to lover), illegitimacy, bigamy, and the fate of the fallen woman. The attraction of the novels was in the exposure of the secrets; readers, particularly women, derived vicarious pleasure and emotional relief from the expression of anxieties, hostilities and fantasies that were traditionally suppressed. This tension is vividly expressed in the journal of Henry James' sister, Alice, who wrote:

As I used to sit immovable reading in the library with waves of violent inclination suddenly invading my muscles taking some one of their myriad forms such as . . . knocking off the head of the benignant pater as he sat with his silver locks, writing at his table, it used to seem to me that the only difference between me and the insane was that I had not only all the horrors and suffering of insanity but the duties of doctor, nurse, and strait-jacket imposed upon me too . . . When all

⁷ Punch, 21 December 1867, Vol. 53, p. 252.

one's moral and natural stock in trade is a temperament forbidding the abandonment of an inch or the relaxation of a muscle, 'tis a never-ending fight.⁸

To the extent that the novels reflected existing realities, readers were forced to face social evils which were generally acknowledged to exist but which prudery and Podsnappery found convenient to ignore. Predictably, fear that the "subversive" sensation novel would have a detrimental effect on family life and individual morality was rampant. It was even suggested by Dr. George Black that the novels would have a "tendency to accelerate the occurrence of menstruation."⁹ However, since it was a popularly-held view that menstruation relieved women of violent sexual desires,¹⁰ it is hard to see how this result could have been considered other than beneficial.

Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, writing on contemporary fiction, was more concerned with complaisant public acceptance of the behavior and attitudes common to the sensation heroine:

We will not ask whence or from whom the influence is derived. It has been brought into being by society, and it naturally reacts upon society . . . It seems to be accepted by the great audience of the circulating libraries as something like the truth. . . . The fact that this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real, is not in any way to be laughed at. Some change must have been wrought upon the social mind ere such things could be tolerated at all. . . .¹¹

⁸ Jean Strouse, Alice James (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 128.

⁹ Showalter, p. 160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

¹¹ Oliphant, "Novels," pp. 258, 260.

II

In spite of criticism by both sexes, the popularity of the resolute heroine continued to increase. The desire of female readers to experience, at least vicariously, some greater freedom of movement, could not be ignored. Ultimately the liberating tendencies of sensational fiction overcame an opposing movement in Victorian society; and in fact, the sensation novel may have achieved its popularity partly as a reaction against it. This was a movement to enshrine women at the heart of family life, to emphasize and venerate the specifically domestic and maternal functions of women, and practically, to limit the opportunities for capable single women like Marian Halcombe.

There were many reasons for the popularity of the "angel in the house" concept. By mid-nineteenth century, middle-class values demonstrated the close relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Seventeenth-century Puritanism had evolved into the Protestant evangelical movement which extolled the productivity of the individual and assured him success through hard work and thrift. There was a strong connection drawn between sex and sin; the former seemed sometimes to be deplored more because sensual indulgence wasted valuable time and energy than because of its inherent immorality. The cult of marriage, home and family was promoted as the most efficient way of achieving social and material progress. At the same time urbanization had narrowed the range of useful activities in

which women could engage outside the home. Ignorance of birth-control methods and reduced infant mortality rates produced large families requiring a great deal of attention and organization; however, the cook, nursery-maid and governess relieved well-off mothers of the actual physical labour involved. This freed them to concentrate on providing moral support and guidance for husband and family. Like Agnes in David Copperfield, a woman could enjoy a measure of power and prestige when her role was perceived as that of "his good angel":

"Sit down," said Agnes cheerfully . . . "If you cannot confidently trust me, who will you trust?"

"Ah, Agnes!" I returned. "You are my good Angel!" She smiled, rather sadly, I thought, and shook her head.

"Yes, Agnes, my good Angel! Always my good Angel!"

"If I were indeed, Trotwood," she returned, "there is one thing that I should set my heart on very much.

. . . On warning you," said Agnes with a steady glance, "against your bad Angel."¹²

Even Collins' flippant Franklin Blake (The Moonstone) invokes the stereotype:

"I have several worthy aspirations, Betteredge; but what am I to do with them now? I am full of dormant good qualities, if only Rachel would have helped me bring them out!" (VI, 287)

Thus women became the moral center of Victorian family life, and, as the Christian tradition lost hold, home took on the aspect of a sacred symbol. Ruskin describes the home as "a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth."¹³ As

¹² Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (1849) (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 366-367.

¹³ John Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," in Sesame and Lilies (1865) (London: Cassell and Co., 1909), p. 74.

Chesterton said of the Victorians, theirs was "the first generation that ever asked its children to worship the hearth without the altar."¹⁴

By the time of Gilbert and Sullivan's H.M.S. Pinafore in 1878, the idealization of wives and mothers was a well-enough established aspect of social culture to provide a focus for satire: "Confide in me; I am a mother!" warbles Little Buttercup. Forty years earlier, however, Mrs. Sarah Stickney Ellis' book on the duties of women was a best-seller. Women aspired to the wifely ideal:

. . . the humble mistress who [sits] alone, guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home; and the remembrance of her character, clothed in moral beauty, has . . . sent him back to that beloved home, a wiser and better man.¹⁵

The stereotype died hard. Even in the eighties Henry James writes of his mother in the same fulsome language:

She was patience, she was wisdom, she was exquisite maternity . . . one can feel, forever, the inextinguishable vibration of her devotion . . . It was a perfect mother's life--the life of a perfect wife. To bring her children into the world--to expend herself, for years, for their happiness and welfare--then, when they had reached a full maturity and were absorbed in the world and in their own interests--to lay herself down in her ebbing strength and yield up her pure soul to the celestial power that had given her this divine commission.¹⁶

¹⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Autobiography (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1936), p. 20.

¹⁵ Sarah Stickney Ellis, "The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits" (1839), in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M.H. Abrams et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), Fourth Edition, II, 1653.

¹⁶ Strouse, p. 27.

The evangelical revival encouraged a reaction away from strictly male gatherings outside the home, and large families forced a male preoccupation with earning--expensive educations had to be provided for sons and marriage portions for daughters. The change in masculine attitude encouraged the dominating father to fade in significance. The "heavy" father of the melodrama was still to be found; but one has only to look to Dickens' Dombey and Son and Collins' Basil to find the tyrannical father under attack. Rising middle-class Victorian fathers, preoccupied with business and the debts of spendthrift sons, more often retreated to library and study in the face of domestic storms. Mother controlled children and household, an iron hand in a velvet glove, her influence radiating a rosy fireside glow:

"I shall never fail to gather my children around me daily, at stated and convenient periods, for higher purposes: to instil into them Christian and moral duties. . . . This is a mother's task-- . . . a child should never hear aught from its mother's lips but persuasive gentleness. . . . " 17

Even when a mother was a perfect model of moral rectitude, as was Mrs. Edmondson in Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe (1853), a daughter could still forget her duty so far as to agree to a secret engagement:

"Laura, you seem to think you owe nothing to anyone but Philip. You forget that you have been keeping up a system of disobedience and concealment, of which I could not have believed a child of mine could be capable.

¹⁷ Mrs. Henry Wood, East Lynne (1861) (New York: A.L. Burt, n.d.), p. 302.

Laura, how you have abused our confidence!"¹⁸

Thackeray recognized the limitations imposed upon the heroine by close parental supervision: "The life of a good young girl who is in the paternal nest as yet," he wrote, "can't have many of those thrilling incidents to which the heroine of romance commonly lays claim." Certainly Becky Sharp's adventures provide an excellent example of what can happen when a young lady must "be her own mamma."¹⁹ It is not surprising then, that when a mother's influence is entirely missing, daughters go astray. The heroine of Aurora Floyd (1863), is a young lady who escapes the "paternal nest" by running off to Paris with her father's groom, and laments the lack of a mother's guiding hand: "Should I have ever cared about horse-racing and read sporting papers if I could have called a good woman 'mother?'" she asks.²⁰

"The heroines of fiction have no mothers," complains an anonymous contributor to The Christian Remembrancer in an 1863 article, citing a formidable array of examples from Scott through Dickens and the Brontes, to George Eliot. The author does not mention Jane Austen, but a brief glance at her six major novels provides a convincing illustration. Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility provide doting but

¹⁸ Charlotte Yonge, The Heir of Redclyffe (London: J.W. Parker, 1853), p. 183.

¹⁹ W.M. Thackeray, Vanity Fair (1848) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), I, 166, 130.

²⁰ Miss Elizabeth Braddon, Aurora Floyd (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1863), p. 105.

incompetent mothers; in Northanger Abbey and Mansfield Park the mothers are absent; in Emma and Persuasion the mothers are dead. Dead, distant, inadequate--not one of Austen's heroines has a mother to keep her out of trouble; and the fathers are equally out of the picture. Mr. Dashwood is dead. Sir Walter Elliot and General Tilney are vain and domineering, but ultimately ineffectual. Sir Thomas Bertram withdraws to Antigua, Mr. Bennett to his study, and Mr. Woodhouse is, bless him, just Mr. Woodhouse.

Nevertheless, Austen's heroines recognize and accept, however reluctantly, that their prospects are limited. As Maria Bertram puts it in Mansfield Park:

Yes, certainly the sun shines and the park looks very cheerrul. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint. I cannot get out, as the starling said.²¹

The sensation heroine rejected any suggestion that self-denial might be character-building. Had she been clad in the loose draperies of Miss Austen's time, rather than the rigid hoops of her own, she would have lifted her skirts and clambered over the gate.

Sensation novelists who dispensed with mothers in order to avoid their dampening effect upon rebellious daughters, were berated for thus freeing their heroines from discipline and allowing them to indulge their passions. The absence of parental guidance, however, opened up for the author a wide range of

²¹ Jane Austen, Mansfield Park (1814) (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962), p. 82.

forbidden delights with which to tempt his heroine. Parental restraints would have allowed no such straying from the straight and narrow path of respectability. Only a respectable girl could expect to receive an eligible proposal of marriage; and the social and financial security that middle-class respectability demanded was only to be found in marriage and domesticity. The anxiety caused by the suggestion that a viper could be cherished at the domestic hearth agitated many a parental breast while providing daughters with a romantic thrill. It is the rebellion of the "angel in the house" and the inherent threat this posed to Victorian ideas of stability and order that animates the sensation novel. In Collins' No Name, for example, Magdalen Vanstone, although technically chaste, cold-bloodedly uses all her sexual equipment to trap the pathetic Noel Vanstone into a travesty of marriage. Lydia Gwilt, the red-headed adventuress of Armada, uses her charms to enslave Midwinter, but fully intends to abandon him once they are married. The ultimate crime of the "angel" is committed by Hester Dethridge in Man and Wife, when, desperate to free herself from her marriage, she murders her husband.

III

The conjunction of a loosening moral structure (particularly in regard to sexual morality) with the rise of the heroine, and the proliferation of this kind of literature at the

hands of female writers, was anathema to readers who held rigid ideas about an Englishwoman's honour:

Now it is no knight of romance . . . for whom the maiden waits. She waits now for flesh and muscles, strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through. . . . But yet a woman has one duty of being pure. There is perhaps nothing of such vital consequence to a nation.²²

This is the opinion of Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, herself a tireless writer whose popular Salem Chapel (1863) entirely concerns the possible loss of virtue of an entirely innocent girl. The book's theme of threatened seduction allows Mrs. Oliphant to speak eloquently (and at length) on behalf of chastity. Although Susan eventually escapes with her virtue intact, the intervening two hundred pages chronicle her brother's hysterical contemplation of his sister's situation:

He gave her up with unspeakable anguish and pity, but he did give her up, and hoped for no deliverance. Shame had taken possession of that image . . . ; he might snatch her out of those polluting arms, and bring home the sullied lily to her mother; but never henceforward could hope or honour blossom about his sister's name.²³

A woman who "fell" and was then abandoned could never expect to make a respectable marriage or to return to her family. The shame of her situation, particularly if her actions resulted in pregnancy, drove many a woman to hide in the cities, eventually attempting to stave off destitution with prostitution. Few writers had a kind word for the prostitute,

²² Oliphant, "Novels," pp. 259, 275.

²³ Oliphant, Salem Chapel (1863) (London: John Leng, n.d.) p. 213.

but Mrs. Gaskell is at least open about what she considers the inevitable fate of the fallen woman. In Mary Barton (1848) John Barton warns his sister-in-law as she determines to follow her lover: "You'll be a street-walker, Esther, and then, don't you go to think I'll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister."²⁴ Mrs. Gaskell is sympathetic to the plight of the fallen woman (hers are always superior to their seducers) who has no means of support and is deprived of the shelter and protection of her home. Still, the picture she paints is a fairly conventional one: "To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper sin and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean."²⁵

Collins had no time for this sort of thing. Sexuality serves the purposes of heroines like Magdalen Vanstone and Lydia Gwilt just as physical strength and an engaging personality were exploited by the Newgate hero-villain. Collins never condemned the mere fact of sexual experience in his unmarried heroines; Simple Sally, the childish prostitute shown plying her trade in The Fallen Leaves (1879), is projected as physically fallen but morally untouched. Collins is by no means committed to the two solutions, death or distance, usually chosen by Dickens for his impure women. Collins' disposition of five of his fallen

²⁴ Mrs. Gaskell, Mary Barton (1848) (London: Oxford University Press, 1906), p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

heroines provides an interesting illustration.

As mentioned earlier, death from typhus becomes the portion of the unpleasant adulteress, Margaret Sherwin, in Basil. The outrageous Miss Swilt (Armada) dies also, but she is allowed to commit suicide and expire in an aura of self-sacrifice. Mercy Merrick (The New Magdalen), a former prostitute who impersonates another woman in a desperate attempt to begin a new life, attracts the Reverend Julian Gray and marries him. Together they emigrate to enter the missionary field, (provoking from Swinburne "the bitter cry of the long-suffering novel-reader: when will the last reformed harlot vanish into space in the arms of the last clerical sceptic . . . ?").²⁶ Anne Silvester (Man and Wife), a well-bred woman who has inexplicably had an affair with one of Collins' least attractive characters, the brutal Geoffrey Delamayn, ends up marrying the wise and acerbic Sir Patrick Lundie, surely an author-surrogate. At the end of The Evil Genius, Sydney Westerfield, a reformed adulteress, is about to marry the rigidly correct Captain Bennydeck, a man who has formerly refused to marry a perfectly respectable but divorced woman on religious grounds! The score, then, is two adulteresses dead, three surviving and respectably married, one to a peer!

All these variations on a theme suggest that Collins took a more pragmatic approach to the fate of the fallen woman, particularly in terms of her possible rehabilitation in society through work or marriage, than did his friend Dickens, who

26 Page, p. 261.

usually eliminates or transports his impure women. Nancy, Lady Dedlock, Little Emily, Martha Endell, Alice Harwood, Rosa Dartle and Miss Wade all either die or are banished from the comforts of polite English society. Faced with temptation, Louisa Bouverby retreats from adulthood to her childhood home, seeking a daughter's status and the protection of her father. Even Edith Dombey, whom Dickens had originally intended as an adulteress but who in the end is merely associated with impurity, receives a metaphoric death sentence. Upon her departure for Italy, she instructs Florence: "When you leave me in this dark room, think that you have left me in the grave. Remember only that I was once and that I loved you!"²⁷

Dickens' impure women are pictured as social victims, often the products of unwise or unkind parents; our sympathy is solicited on their behalf. Yet, paradoxically, the characteristics common to these women--frigidity, hostility, pride--are all qualities for which they are ultimately punished; as repentant sinners they must expiate their guilt. This harsh treatment is congruent with Dickens' rigid moral scheme. The women are not consciously seductive (with the exception perhaps of Estella Havisham) as are Magdalen Vanstone and Lydia Gwilt. They do not wait in hotels for their lovers to join them as does Anne Silvester. They are not discovered in passionate embraces as is Sydney Westerfield in The Evil Genius:

Her voice, her look, maddened him. He drew her to his

²⁷ Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son, pp. 871-872.

bosom; he held her in his arms; she struggled vainly to get away from him. "Oh," she murmured, "how cruel you are! . . . Oh, Herbert, I'm dying -- dying -- dying!" . . . He kissed her again and again. (XXIV, 198)

Collins' women feel desire and exhibit passion. When necessary they cope realistically with the sexual dimension of human relationships; the common-law relationship in No Name and the adultery and divorce in The Evil Genius are discussed without recrimination or remorse. Collins was determined that human sexuality should not be ignored by the novelist. He expressed this opinion in the marginal notes of his copy of Forster's Life of Dickens. The notes were quoted in a Pall Mall Gazette article of 1890, with editorial insertions. Next to Forster's statement that any page of Dickens' books could be safely placed in the hands of a child, Collins notes:

It is impossible to read such stuff as this without a word of protest. If it is true, which it is not, it would imply the condemnation of Dickens' books as works of art, it would declare him to be guilty of deliberately presenting a false reflection of human life. If this wretched English claptrap means anything, it means that the novelist is forbidden to touch on the sexual relations which literally swarm about him . . . [except] those relations are licensed by [the word marriage has been run through, and in its place is written] the ceremony called marriage. One expects this essentially immoral view of the functions of the novelist from a professor of claptrap like the late Bishop of Manchester. But that Forster should quote it with approval is a sad discovery indeed.²⁰

²⁰ Wilkie Collins, "Wilkie Collins about Charles Dickens," Pall Mall Gazette, 20 Jan. 1890, p. 3. Collins must have made another "sad discovery" in Forster's jealous elimination of virtually any mention of Collins from the book. Collins is said to have referred to the book as "the life of John Forster with occasional anecdotes of Charles Dickens." Forster's behavior seems particularly ungracious considering Collins' affectionate dedication of Armadale to Forster some years earlier. See Robinson, p. 260.

Dickens' approach to human sexuality is demonstrably prudish compared to Collins'; however Collins revered Dickens and perhaps protested too much on his friend's behalf on this occasion. After all, in 1867 Dickens had written to Collins regarding his (Dickens') refusal to defend Charles Reade's Griffith Gaunt in court against charges of immorality:

If I had [had] read to me those passages about Gaunt's going up to his wife's bed drunk and that last child's being conceived, and was asked whether, as Editor, I would have passed those passages, . . . I should be obliged to say No . . . I should say that what was pure to an artist might be impurely suggestive to inferior minds.²⁹

The preoccupation with women that was a feature of the sensation novel and a particular feature of Collins' novels, was by no means a literary departure. Female characters had been central to the plots of the Gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliffe and others; but while women in the Gothic novel and in the stage melodrama had been depicted as physically helpless--morally, they were towers of strength. Using their sexuality to advance themselves socially or financially was as unthinkable to these women as the idea that they could successfully defend themselves against physical violence. In general this is the way virtuous women still appear in Dickens' novels in mid-nineteenth century. The handful who exhibit the determination to pursue an independent course of action are clearly impure (Lady Dedlock, Miss Wade) or associated with impurity (Edith Dombey). All of

²⁹ Charles Dickens, Letters of Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, p. 154.

Dickens' virtuous women, however, display an unlimited capacity for providing humble and devoted support of men--fathers, husbands, lovers--and an equal strength of will to suppress those dangerous passions against which Signora Laurentini warned Emily. Sensation novelists were forcing the Victorian reader to face the existence of the passions, however much respectable society preferred to ignore the emotions and exalt the repression of feeling:

Lucy was always the companion and confidante of the lovers; . . . It was hard to have to help them plan a thousand schemes of pleasure, in which--Heaven pity her--she was to join. But she bore her cross meekly, . . . she never told Talbot Bulstrode that she had gone mad and loved him, and was fain to die.³⁰

Collins' heroines are not necessarily physically vulnerable or morally virtuous. They descend rather from Defoe's successful prostitutes Moll Flanders and Roxana, and the chaste but self-willed Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse of Jane Austen. Their immediate ancestress was probably Becky Sharp, the ultimate designing woman and embodiment of the "mercantile morality." Becky is undoubtedly the center of interest in Vanity Fair, and Thackeray's subtitle, A Story Without a Hero only serves to suggest that the author may in fact have replaced the missing hero with a heroine.

In Collins' novels there is no question that the heroine reigns supreme. Physically and mentally alert, aware of the power of their own sexuality, unhampered by the restraints of

³⁰ Miss Elizabeth Braddon, Aurora Floyd, p. 103.

respectability, Collins' heroines are as often motivated by self-interest as by altruism. Several of his best novels concern women who are technically chaste, but who outrage convention by their assumption of a man's role: the pursuit, usually in defiance of the existing legal framework, of what they consider to be justice. Others present heroines who are neither respectable nor repentant and who are courageous mainly in their own best interests. In many of his later novels he attempts to secure a measure of acceptance, or at least of mercy, for women with whom Victorian society dealt cruelly, women who were excluded from the shelter of home and forced to fend for themselves in a non-domestic world dominated by men.

CHAPTER 4

Collins' Female Characters

When I say that I know women, I mean I know that I don't know them. Every single woman I ever knew is a puzzle to me, as, I have no doubt, she is to herself.

W.M. Thackeray, "Mr. Brown's Letters"

I

Considering that more women than ever before were writing, and writing about women, it is surprising that fully believable female characters were so rarely achieved. The reasons are partly to be found in the poorly-formulated self-images of women writers in whom the "angel in the house" ideal had been inculcated. Angels are, after all, fairly insubstantial creatures; and women, disciplined from the cradle to find satisfaction in the happiness of others, no doubt found it hard at first to create convincing female characters who had the courage to take responsibility for their own lives. To this extent Thackeray's somewhat patronizing remark was correct; women were still a "puzzle to themselves." Besides, the sensation formula was easy to follow and sold well. In it immediate frustrations could be vented (and veiled) in revenge

and escape fantasies.

It is not so surprising, therefore, that some of the best attempts at serious fictional studies of women should have been made by male authors: Thackeray, Collins and Reade. Considering his generally infelicitous literary style, the latter was unusually subtle in this field, despite his vigorous rejection of psychological analysis:

Her mind was in a whirl; and, were I to imitate those writers who undertake to dissect and analyze the heart on such moments, and put the exact result on paper, I should be apt to sacrifice truth to precision; I must stick to my old plan, and tell you what she did; that will surely be some index to her mind, especially with my female readers.¹

Yet in the same novel, Griffith Gaunt (1866), Reade writes passages like the following describing Kate Gaunt's recognition of her real feelings for Father Leonard:

Here in her calm solitude her mind crept out of its cave, like wild things at dusk, and whispered to her heart that Leonard perhaps admired her more than was safe or prudent. Then this alarmed her, yet caused her a secret complacency; and that, her furtive satisfaction, alarmed her still more.

Charles Dickens, the most famous of the sensation novelists, rarely, if ever, created a plausible female character. Even Collins, his ardent admirer, admitted to Dickens' deficiencies in this area:

The character of Nancy is the finest thing he ever did. He never afterwards saw all sides of a woman's character--saw all round her. That the same man who could create Nancy created the second Mrs. Dombey is the

¹ Charles Reade, Griffith Gaunt (1866) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1903), pp. 164, 88.

most incomprehensible anomaly I know of in literature.² As Collins does not enlarge on this note (it appears in the margin of his copy of Forster's Life of Dickens) we must accept it as it stands, but it seems curious that the creator of Lydia Gwilt could have preferred Dickens' characterization of Nancy to that of Edith Dombey. On the same page Collins also comments that " . . . the latter half of 'Dombey' no intelligent person can have read without astonishment at the badness of it,"³ so it is obvious he disliked the novel. Collins' predisposition for the melodramatic encouraged him to think in positive terms of the "damsel in distress": "I think no woman ever knows how utterly she has given herself up to the man she loves," he wrote in No Name, "until the man has ill-treated her" (XII, 454). Probably he saw Nancy in this light; he may also have been persuaded by Dickens' emotional reaction to Nancy's plight as evinced in his friend's dramatic readings from Oliver Twist.

By an odd coincidence, Collins was to play the part of the savior of the distressed damsel in real life. His alleged rescue of the original "woman in white," Carolyn Graves, from ill-treatment at the hands of another man, is recounted by Millais.⁴ This situation forms the basis for the startlingly effective moonlight meeting of mad Anne Catherick and Walter Hartright that sets the stage for The Woman in White. Robert

² Collins, "Wilkie Collins about Charles Dickens," p. 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John G. Millais, The Life and Letters of John Everett Millais (London: Methuen, 1899), pp. 278-281.

Ashley describes "Collins' preoccupation with the role of women in a man's world, his fondness for the social outcast theme, and his sympathy with the fallen woman and the repentant Magdalen."⁵ Accordingly, Collins seems to have been more sympathetic to Nancy's pathetic helplessness than to the atmosphere of repressed hostility and violence which surrounds Edith Dombey. In her melodramatic confrontation with Carker, Edith's pride is never humbled, and what is probably more important for Collins' response, she appears at the very least "unwomanly" in her determination to abandon her home and family. While not strictly wicked, she is Dickens' closest approach to the villainess of the melodrama.

For although the heroine of the melodrama was conventionally fair and fragile, there was occasionally a role for the villainess to play. It was usually taken by a dark or red-haired woman whose demonic tendencies contrasted with the angelic part played by the heroine. In Collins' first sensation novel, Basil, the author creates just this situation. The pale, blue-eyed, and angelic Clara, however, is so completely undefined as a character that the presence of the villainess Margaret Sherwin entirely fills the stage.

Margaret is a thoroughly convincing character--selfish, spoiled, callous and cruel. As Swinburne wrote of her: "The horrible heroine, beast as she is, is a credible and conceivable

⁵ Robert Ashley, Wilkie Collins (New York: Haskell House, 1976), p. 76.

beast."⁶ When she is with Basil, Margaret plays the role of the blushing maiden; she realizes that she is dealing with a gentleman and behaves accordingly. When she is alone, however, or believes herself to be so, we are shown the vicious nature of the real woman. First we watch her tormenting her canary:

She was . . . making a plaything for the poor captive canary of a piece of sugar, which she rapidly offered and drew back again. . . . The bird hopped and fluttered up and down in his prison after the sugar. . . . She was laughing with the glee of a child; darting the piece of sugar about incessantly from place to place. (I, 56-57)

She exercises the same sadistic tyranny over her ailing mother:

"I tell you, mamma, I must and will have the dress whether papa chooses or not. . . . He gives me my way in everything; and so ought you! . . . That's the way it always is with you, mamma . . . you are so excessively tiresome! But I will have the dress, I'm determined."
(I, 179)

Finally we are shown Margaret in a frenzy of passion as she attempts to kill the cat with a poker and is restrained by the maid:

"I'll kill the vile brute! I'll kill the hateful cat! I don't care whose it is!--my poor, dear, dear bird!"

"Oh, you mustn't--you mustn't indeed! It's missus's cat, recollect--poor missus's, who's always ill. . . ."

"I don't care! The cat has killed my bird and the cat shall be killed for doing it!--it shall!--it shall--it shall!!! I'll call in the first boy from the street to catch it and hang it!" (I, 181-2)

When Basil, who overhears this scene, remonstrates with her, Margaret takes refuge in tears. At this point the infatuated Basil invokes the "you're so beautiful when you're angry"

⁶ A.C. Swinburne, "Wilkie Collins," Studies in Prose and Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1894), p. 111.

cliche: "I could not repress an involuntary feeling of admiration when my eyes first rested on her. Even anger itself looked lovely in that lovely face!" (I, 182).

Margaret's lack of self-control is fulfilled in her adultery with Hannon, a man who considers her "worthy of nothing" and merely wants to debase and enslave her. The only solution for a thoroughly bad girl like Margaret was death, and the social critic in Collins, which was never to be silenced for long, is allowed free play during Margaret's death-bed delirium:

"Hannon will tell you and all your family how many women are as scarlet as I, as--virtue wears it at home in secret, and vice wears it abroad in public; that's the only difference, he says." (I, 391-2)

She also produces a few home truths for Basil:

"... a nice husband he's been to me--a husband who waits a year! Ha! ha! he calls himself a man doesn't he? A husband who waits a year!" (I, 390)

Collins' prefatory comment that the main events in Basil sprang from facts "within his own knowledge" may account for the pessimism of the book and the unalloyed unpleasantness of its heroine-villainess, but having apparently written this material out of his system, Collins never again created a totally one-sided heroine. Even the notorious Miss Gwilt is redeemed by her self-knowledge and sense of proportion.

As was to be the case in most of Collins' novels, the domestic ideal is shattered in Basil: Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin, Basil and Margaret, Basil and his father--all are bitter examples of family breakdown. Not surprisingly, the only example of a successful domestic relationship is the liaison between

Ralph and his "morganatic" wife. In this first and most pessimistic of Collins' novels, there are no happy endings. Margaret, Mannon and the unhappy Mrs. Sherwin die; Basil and his sister elect to live in exile; Ralph for all his good humour must face the fact that he too is a social outcast; and Basil's father must face his failures as well. Only the callous and self-seeking draper, Mr. Sherwin, is left to flourish in the materialistic society he understands so well.

II

The perpetuation of the female melodramatic stereotypes became a literary cliché of the sensation novelist:

I know that it is a rule that when two sisters are presented in a novel one must be tall and dark, and the other short and light. I know that . . . raven hair is synonymous with strong passions and an unfortunate destiny. I know that soft blue eyes . . . cannot be associated with anything but . . . innocence and final matrimonial happiness. . . . Would any desperate man effect an alteration? . . . It might be a dangerous experiment to make this change; but it would be worth trying.⁷

Having advocated departure from the pattern, Collins chose to parody it in his first best-seller, The Woman in White. In this novel he offers two half-sisters: dark, dynamic Marian Halcombe and pale, passive Laura Fairlie. Marian, however, while dark-haired and passionate, is not beautiful. Collins impresses

⁷ Collins, "A Petition to the Novel Writers," p. 483.

her unattractive face upon the reader in a powerful introductory sequence: "I said to myself, The lady is dark . . . I said to myself, The lady is young . . . I said to myself, . . . The lady is ugly!" (I, 46) But although Marian lacks a beautiful face, she is by no means unattractive. She possesses that physical characteristic common to all Collins' heroines from Antonina on: a graceful, slender figure. Hartright comments: "The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body . . . set me in a flutter of expectation," and he notes "the symmetrical limbs that betrayed their beauty when they moved" (I, 46).

Although Marian is not conventionally beautiful, she is conventionally passionate. She is passionate in her sister's defence and in her responses to both the men in the novel. Thus, in Marian, Collins projects a heroine who is ugly and passionately good, rather than beautiful and passionately bad. And what of the dark heroine's unfortunate destiny? If good fortune consists in marriage with the hero then Marian must settle for less; but it is problematical whether she is not ultimately more of a wife to Hartright than is her sister, at least in all but the sexual sense.

Nevertheless, while Marian relinquishes marriage with Hartright to her sister, she engages the interest of the most fascinating man in the novel, the masterful Count Fosco. Thus she does not actually sacrifice the heroine's conventional claim to sexual desirability. In this way Collins manages to ring a few changes on the stereotypes. He offers an ugly heroine who

attracts, and is attracted by, an entertaining villain who voices with authority many of the author's own opinions. He creates a weak hero who is dismissed entirely from the action of a good part of the book, and who is destined to find romance in a menage-a-trois, his devotion divided between the heroine and her colourless sister.

In liberating Marian to do a man's job--detection--Collins projects a masculine image for his heroine. This has the effect of establishing her early in the book as a credible opponent to the brilliant Fosco, but what is disturbing here is that Marian is not presented simply as a capable woman; her capabilities are tied to her masculine nature: "Can you look at Miss Halcombe," asks Fosco of Glyde, "and not see that she has the foresight and resolution of a man?" (I, 492) From Collins' initial description of her, these qualities are kept constantly before us:

The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm masculine mouth and jaw; [and] prominent, piercing brown eyes. . . . (I, 46-7)

She does not weep as women weep:

My tears do not flow so easily as they ought--they come almost like men's tears, with sobs that seem to tear me in pieces. . . . (I, 246)

She is also more typically masculine in her strength of will and determination than is Hartright. This is most obvious in her response to Hartright's expression of his hopeless love for

Laura:

"Crush it! Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man." (I, 106)

In the violence of the language, in her sheer force of will, for a moment Marian changes roles with Hartright. Cast in the feminine role he is distraught, unable to compose himself. At this point, when Marian's masculine resolution has been established, Hartright departs from the scene, leaving the field to her.

Rosamond Franklin (The Dead Secret, 1857) was the first of Collins' heroines to be both resolute and good, but she was not concerned with the role her sex forced upon her. Marian is so concerned and she becomes the first spokeswoman for the author's sympathetic perception of the frustration and hostility engendered in women (perhaps especially in plain women) by their limited opportunities in a man's world:

"No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace. . . . They take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to its kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return? Let me go, Laura--I'm mad when I think of it!" (I, 271-2)

In spite of the fact that Collins would never have endorsed the feminist movement, he was, in the words of Dorothy Sayers, "the most genuinely feminist of all the nineteenth-century novelists, because he is the only one capable of seeing women without sexual bias, and of respecting them as human individuals in their own right. . . ." Rosanna Spearman in The Moonstone is a case in point. There is nothing sentimental or patronizing in

* Dorothy L. Sayers, "Introduction" to Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone (London: Dent, 1944), p. viii.

Collins' treatment of the hunchbacked servant's hopeless passion for Franklin Blake. Rosanna's pain is the pain of unrequited love, not a pain tied specifically to her situation, class or disfigurement. Collins recognized the power of the physically attractive to control and manipulate others; nevertheless, in his women he constantly emphasizes qualities other than facial perfection: graceful movement, a slender figure, the tough intellectual cast of mind which Fosco so admires in Marian Halcombe.

Marian's intelligence and determination, however, count for nothing in the face of Sir Percival's cruelty to Laura:

If I had been a man I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door, and left his house, never on any consideration to enter it again. But I was only a woman. . . . (I, 371)

Since she is ". . . nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats, for life. . . ." (I, 297), she cannot carry her campaign through to completion without masculine help. Thus, later in the novel, after her courageous and dangerous escapade on the roof attempting to overhear the plot against her sister, Marian becomes ill. Her collapse is tied to her physical inability to withstand the evening's exposure to wind and rain, a situation which would presumably be easily withstood by the male constitution. At this point she is obliged to give up her mission and Hartright returns to take over. He completes the "heroic" action of the novel, and Marian is left with the conventional feminine role--maternal protector of the helpless Laura and helpmeet to a man: "You shall not regret, Walter, that

you have only a woman to help you" (II, 94). For all her masculine traits, she is "nothing but a woman," liberated to compete with men, but rescued when the going gets tough and given a safe seat at the Hartright fireside.

And how safe a fireside is it? It is in fact the only example in the book of the home as a refuge. The Woman in White is a veritable celebration of failed domestic relationships. The Cathericks, Glydes and Foscos are hardly representative of marital bliss; the Foscos persecute their nieces, and the girls' Uncle Fairlie is unkind and self-serving; Anne Catherick is rejected by her mother, as is Walter Hartright by his, when he marries Laura; and the fact that Sir Percival's parents were unmarried provides the basis for the whole conspiracy.

The novel looks below surface respectability and exposes the cruelty and misery that can exist within the family. But for women to rebel is to risk rejection by society. The important perception here is that once one's position in society is lost, respectable opinion, which responds only to surface appearances, will act to obliterate one's very identity. When a crime against an individual is beyond the very limited imaginative range of middle-class morality, the plodding machinery of the law cannot cope with it and the criminal will defeat society's representatives of law and order. In this case only the initiative of flexible and sensitive individuals working outside the established legal system can prevent the wrongs and repair the damage inflicted by society upon its victims. Collins is

protesting that society must not accept with complacency the blacks and whites of surface respectability, but must become more aware of and sympathetic to the ambiguous greys.

III

This concern with social protest, so basic to Collins' nature and so damaging to his later writing, finds a more articulate voice in his next novel, No Name. As complex as The Woman in White, No Name repeats certain of the previous book's themes, but while in the former novel interest is spread amongst several characters, in No Name it is centered on the heroine, Magdalen Vanstone. Like Laura Fairlie, she suffers the loss of her domestic security and her identity; unlike Laura, Magdalen attempts to restore order to her life unaided. Collins' portrait of Magdalen Vanstone marks a further stage in the emancipation of the heroine.

Upon their father's death, the Vanstone sisters, Magdalen and Norah, find that circumstances have only recently enabled their parents to marry. The marriage invalidates Mr. Vanstone's will and he is accidentally killed before he can execute a new one. His daughters, already illegitimate, are now disinherited, and Mr. Vanstone's fortune passes to his nephew, Noel Vanstone. Norah accepts the humble role of governess in order to support herself; Magdalen does not. She leaves home, enlists the aid of

her unscrupulous Uncle Wragge, and, assuming a false name, undertakes to marry her cousin Noel in order to regain her inheritance. The conspiracy against the sickly Noel and his cunning housekeeper, Mrs. Lecount, constitutes the best part of the action of No Name. As there is no villain to foil in the story, (the behavior of all the major characters being more or less rooted in the contingencies of the plot), the reader's sympathies must be vitally engaged in the resolution of the moral ambiguities of the situation. The most perplexing of these is the problem of Magdalen's motivation.

In The Woman in White, while Marian Halcombe's actions are sometimes technically illegal, her motives are always irreproachable. In No Name the heroine's motives are at worst, specious and at best, obsessive. Many readers see Magdalen's motives as sordid and self-serving and thus, as a stumbling block in the way of accepting the validity of her whole moral dilemma. While we watch her planning to entrap the pathetic Noel Vanstone into a travesty of marriage, it is difficult to accept her assertion that it is ". . . not for the sake of the fortune--mind that! For the sake of the right" (XII, 484). At the height of the action she feels her power over him: "I can twist any man alive around my finger," she thought with a smile of superb triumph, "as long as I keep my looks" (XII, 439). Later she justifies her actions: "Thousands of women marry for money. . . . Why shouldn't I?" (XIII, 133) To paraphrase George Eliot on Jane Eyre, all heroism is good, but one would like it

to be in a nobler cause than the one Magdalen chooses.

Collins himself undermines the reality of Magdalen's conflict in his preface to the book. Here he states that in Magdalen he "depicts the struggles of a human creature, under the opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt . . ." (XII, 5), and this Good and Evil theme recurs at regular intervals throughout the book: (XII, 210, 337, 388; XIII, 468). These capitalized over-simplifications suggest that Magdalen is merely a vessel in which abstract forces fight for supremacy, a suggestion which denies her any influence over the outcome of the struggle, and reduces our conviction in the reality of her suffering. It also lays the author open to the critics:

The only moral we can draw from No Name is one that we know from his smug preface Wilkie Collins did not intend--the moral that evil is the best policy because, though it may fail directly, it succeeds indirectly.⁹

But in spite of his preface, Collins is not concerned with abstract forces; he doesn't believe Magdalen's behavior is "Evil" with or without a capital letter. Perhaps he was as contemptuous of his reading audience as Louisa May Alcott, who described her sentimental stories for girls as "moral pap."¹⁰ But if Collins was not really concerned with labels, his friend Dickens took them more seriously. His letter to Collins on the subject of No Name indicates this preoccupation. In January of

⁹ Geoffrey Tillotson, Criticism and the Nineteenth Century (London: Athlone Books, 1967), p. 243.

¹⁰ Martha Saxton, Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 17.

1862 he sent Collins a list of 27 suggested titles for the book, all of which are either unbelievably banal (Playing Out the Play, Through Thick and Thin, Straight On) or incredibly irrelevant (Which is Which?, The Twig and the Tree, The Beginning and the End). Several of his titles (Magdalen's Changes, Changed or Developed?) indicate his concern with judging whether Magdalen's experiences have chastened and improved her.¹¹

Regardless of whether the Good/Evil theme is a mere sop to the values of his readers, what really interests Collins is Magdalen's attempts to deal with the collapse of her domestic and financial security: her early defiance and revenge, her inability to sustain these reactions indefinitely, her eventual breakdown and the reassertion of the latent good qualities of her character. Only if one can accept Magdalen's obsession with restoring both her name and her inheritance can one believe in the terrible conflict which arises between her conscience and her attempted denial of it. This struggle, when Collins is wise enough to allow it to speak for itself, is self-evident:

. . . she looked her position unflinchingly in the face. . . . She knew the true alternative and faced it. On one side was the revolting ordeal of the marriage; on the other, the abandonment of her purpose. Was it too late to choose between the sacrifice of the purpose and the sacrifice of herself? Yes! too late. . . . The more she shrank, the harder she struggled, the more mercilessly it drove her on. (XIII, 126)

¹¹ Letters, pp. 121-22.

Collins speaks in a curiously confident way about the emotional reactions of women. It is hard to know whether his insight was merely intuitive or whether it was gained through his knowledge of the unhappy experiences of Carolyn Graves:

The woman never lived yet who could cast a true-love out of her heart because the object of that love was unworthy of her. All she can do is to struggle against it in secret--to sink in the contest if she is weak; to win her way through it if she is strong, by a process of self-laceration which is, of all moral remedies applied to a woman's nature, the most dangerous and the most desperate; of all moral changes the surest to mark her for life. (XII, 509)

Magdalen's despair at Frank's betrayal strengthens her resolve:

There are things I would have died sooner than do at one time. . . . I don't care now whether I do them or not. I am nothing to myself. . . . I suppose I have lost something. What is it? Heart? Conscience? I don't know. Do you? Who cares what I have lost? It has gone. (XII, 477-78)

Magdalen's isolation begins with the realization of her illegitimate status and the loss of her financial security. Her determination to desert her respectable home and go on the stage to support herself cuts her off still further from society. She cannot forget that it is the existing legal system that has driven her outside the law in order to find herself an acceptable place in the society which the legal system represents. When she achieves her objective of marriage, she writes triumphantly to her old governess:

I have made the general sense of propriety my accomplice this time. Do you know who I am? I am a respectable married woman. . . . I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last. . . . The law would acknowledge my claim. You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody's Child Somebody's Wife. (XIII, 276)

Magdalen is successful in her attempt to marry her cousin Noel, but upon his death is unable to regain her lost fortune. Reduced to failure, she suffers a complete mental and physical breakdown which effectively ends her crusade. In accordance with her more complex motives, Magdalen's collapse does not have a directly physical cause as does Maria's. Magdalen's "giddy bewilderment of thought and helpless suspension of feeling" (XIII, 403) are perhaps best ascribed to an inability to sustain her efforts at deception indefinitely in opposition to the promptings of her conscience. For it is the reassertion of Magdalen's better nature, formed during her early years, which precipitates her breakdown and which allows Collins to present the chastened Magdalen as conforming to the ideal of feminine incorruptibility and therefore, as a suitable candidate for the position of "angel in the house." This makes Magdalen's end consonant with her beginning; we leave her in the same conventionally respectable setting from which she came.

The speedy transition of the heroine from the depths of despair to the heights of euphoria bothers many readers who feel that this transition is not morally compatible with the actions which precede it. Certainly the fortuitous arrival of Captain Kirke in the good ship Deliverance is difficult to swallow; and considering the courage, intelligence, and resolution Magdalen has displayed, qualities sufficiently unusual in either sex, her rapturous admiration of Kirke, "Oh if I could be a man, how I should like to be such a man as this!" (XIII, 461) strikes an

uncharacteristic and tasteless note. It would seem more poetically just that all Magdalen's scheming should result in at least a measure of frustration in addition to a high fever.

Magdalen is restored to the domestic hearth in defiance of one melodramatic convention and in accordance with another; she lives happily-ever-after and escapes the punishment she seems to have deserved. This is reasonable enough if in fact Collins was himself guilty of "clap-trap morality" in his pompous Preface and intended to show Magdalen's behavior as merely misguided rather than as Evil. There is no reason why human error should inevitably incur retribution. This is merely a restatement of Count Fosco's cynical but realistic assessment of a society which can "console itself for the worst of its shortcomings with a little bit of clap-trap" (I, 351), clap-trap such as the cliché that crime does not pay.

What causes Magdalen to fail is not retribution but conscience. Wragge, unencumbered with this commodity, enjoys considerable success. He considers his actions neither criminal nor mercenary, and certainly not "Evil". As he puts it: "I merely understand the age I live in" (XIII, 454). Wragge feels his deceptions are sanctioned by the self-deception of society, the values sustaining most of his victims. So Collins' refinement of villainy into roguery and punishment into reward is merely a commentary on outdated morality in an age when "Evil" is not so easily recognized. Wragge succeeds where Magdalen fails because he lacks Collins' capitulation to the

feminine ideal, an old-fashioned conscience. Magdalen's early training reasserts itself. What she might have become but for her background is illustrated by the hardened adventuress of Armadale, Lydia Gwilt.

IV

"How unnatural all this would be, if it was written in a book!" exclaims Miss Gwilt in the midst of her machinations. The reader, faint but pursuing, cannot but agree. In Armadale Collins isolates a nightmare world in which the characters--evil, unhappy, obsessed--act out their drama against a backdrop which, considering the usual preoccupations of the sensation novel, is hardly recognizable as the "real" world. Michael Booth suggests that "it is with the domestic melodrama that the curious paradox begins of a mostly unreal content combining with increasingly realistic settings, a dream world disguised as a real one."¹² This description also seems to fit the general run of sensation novels; but Armadale is an exception. Perhaps the world of Armadale would be better described as the real world disguised as a dream. Given a plot based on the fulfillment of a prophetic dream and overshadowed by the brooding presence of an inscrutable fate, it is not surprising the story lacks a sense of everyday "reality." One

¹² Booth, p. 120.

early reviewer described the novel as having "the effect of a literary nightmare."¹³

Into this nightmare world (and it would be pointless, if not impossible, to untangle the complex web of the story here) Collins introduces his ultimate femme fatale, Lydia Gwilt. The characterization of Miss Gwilt is not entirely convincing, but she is the author's most ambitious attempt to portray the inner workings of a character's mind. Thirty-five years of bitter experience have developed in her the cunning and determination of the Newgate villain, the resolute will of Marian Halcombe, and the recklessness of Magdalen Vanstone. These she combines with an irresistible sex-appeal all her own. Collins' description hisses like a snake:

She had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the siren invitations that seduce the sense--a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a sexual sorcery in her smile. (VIII, 73)

Marian Halcombe is a good woman nobly motivated; Magdalen is also fundamentally good but briefly misguided into espousing motives unworthy of her; but neither of these women is handicapped as Lydia Gwilt is by a lifetime of criminal association and sexual depravity. At the beginning of the novel Collins seems undecided about the origins of Lydia's wickedness. We are prepared to meet a "born" criminal in the description of the youthful Lydia: "No creature more innately deceitful and more innately pitiless ever walked this earth" (VIII, 51). The

¹³ Page, Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage, p. 151.

repetition of "innately" here certainly suggests the idea of congenital evil; yet Collins takes great pains to reconstruct Lydia's background, pointing out the social and environmental pressures that have led her to a life of crime. In picturing her struggles to overcome her evil impulses, Collins suggests that heredity and destiny are not locked together at birth, and that man is capable of controlling his future in spite of heredity and environment. Collins assumes in the novel that Miss Gwilt has a degree of choice in her decision as to whether early influences will control her future and drive her to revenge herself on men, or whether she will give in to her half-unwilling passion for Midwinter. This more optimistic view of man as capable of controlling his own destiny is entirely at odds with the fatalistic theme of the novel, and the conflict works against our belief in Lydia's struggles in the same way that the profit motive works against Magdalen's protestations that she is marrying Noel Vanstone only to uphold the "right."

Nevertheless, Collins' presentation of Lydia invites our understanding and sympathy. Whereas we are shown no motivating force fuelling Fosco's power-hungry malignancy, we are invited to understand the sources of Miss Gwilt's lust for revenge. While Fosco views his wickedness with the approval of a fond parent, Lydia is pictured wrestling with her destructive impulses. Fosco's admiration of Marian only affects his judgement, never his evil nature; but Lydia's love for Midwinter humanizes her. The tug-of-war between the impulses of love and

hate recorded in Lydia's remarkable diary sustain the suspense of the story as well as our interest in the heroine.

Lydia's self-torment fails to be as convincing as it might, partly because of the powerful influence of the fatality theme, but also because we are already aware of the enormity of her criminal associations. She has progressed from forgery, theft and fraud, through adultery, bigamy and prostitution, to murder. Furthermore, she has been in prison, and at the time of the novel her closest associates are a procuress and an abortion doctor. This infamous history makes her accomplished needlework, her polished performance on the piano (Mozart is her specialty) and her literate and profuse correspondence highly improbable and occasionally absurd. In fact, the contrast between Miss Gwilt's wicked past and her presentation as a chaste and accomplished governess might well have appeared ludicrous had not Collins handled her in such a way as to force us to take her seriously.

The co-existence in Miss Gwilt of the qualities of the feminine ideal and the degraded criminal was abhorrent to middle-class sensibilities; yet it is the powerful expression of both these aspects of her personality, and the tension thus sustained, which keep Lydia Gwilt from becoming a caricature. Her diary, improbably literate yet chillingly convincing, is an astonishing document which provides an outlet for her compulsive need to confess and a mirror reflecting her self-image. The diary records her frenzied state of mind, torn as she is between

her love for Midwinter and her temptation to abandon him. Her ability to analyze her behavior with very objectivity even in the midst of hysteria is neatly indicated by the characteristic twist of humour at the end of these lines:

I don't care. I'm lonely and helpless. I want somebody who is gentle and loving to make much of me. I wish I had his head on my bosom again; I have a good mind to go to London and marry him. Am I mad? Yes; all people who are as miserable as I am are mad. I must go to the window and get some air. Shall I jump out? No; it disfigures one so, and the coroner's inquest lets so many people see it. (IX, 158)

It is the diary that provides the evidence of Lydia's growing love for Midwinter, the emotion that infuses whatever noble qualities she can be thought to possess, into her character. Her passion for Midwinter precipitates her struggle with, and near triumph over, her former life and degraded sexuality.

Lydia's initial response to her recognition of Midwinter's feeling for her is one of speculation: ". . . she looked at him with a furtive interest and surprise. 'How that man loves me!' she thought" (VIII, 375). Yet Lydia Gwilt hates men; her interest is "furtive" because it alerts her to the knowledge that she can make use of Midwinter. Magdalena uses men, both Noel Vanstone, and in a different way, Wragge, to achieve her ends. But Lydia Gwilt uses men because she fears and loathes them. Because of the brutal treatment she has received at their hands, she longs to revenge herself on the whole sex. Her hatred is directed at Midwinter's friend Allan Armadale in particular, and is expressed in language charged with sexual significance:

I began to feel a terrible excitement. . . . There I was

alone with him . . . and having it in my mind all the time to brush his life out of my way, when the moment came, as I might brush a stain off my gown. It made my blood leap, and my cheeks flush. (IX, 252)

Her hatred and distrust of men is too strong to be easily overcome, yet in spite of it her passion for Midwinter grows stronger:

Is it my love for Midwinter that has altered me? Or is it his love for me that has taken possession not only of all I wish to give him, but of all I wish to keep from him as well? I feel as if I had lost myself--lost myself I mean, in him. . . . (IX, 288)

Finally, however, the remnants of her better nature triumph, and she abandons herself to her love for Midwinter, marrying him joyfully:

I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness underfoot. I am innocent; I am happy again. My love! My angel! (IX, 302)

But soon after the wedding Midwinter succumbs once more to feelings of guilt and morbid fears for the life of his friend Armadale. Lydia misinterprets this and, feeling unloved, is unable any longer to resist her impulse to destroy Armadale:

She went down into the hall again, and circled round and round it like a wild creature in a cage. At the third turn, she felt something moving softly against her dress. . . . She took the animal up in her arms . . . "Armadale hates cats," she whispered in the creature's ear. "Come up and see Armadale killed!" (IX, 553)

Armadale is a highly melodramatic novel and as such shares many characteristics with the Gothic Novel: The evocation of the "uncanny," the rhetorical tone of many passages, and the struggle to reassert a morality strong enough to defeat the menacing power of evil. Above all, the book evokes an overwhelming sense of anxiety. In The Melodramatic Imagination,

Peter Brooks suggests that "melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue."¹⁴ Armadale occasionally conveys this sense of society coming "unglued"; certainly there is evidence in the novel of social disintegration. This absence of the familiar yardsticks of social stability is one of the reasons for the book's nightmare quality. For once, Collins cuts the sensation novel free of its ties with daily life, leaving his characters to cope as best they can in a dream world of insecurity, anxiety and suspense. They live isolated in their imaginations and obsessions in a world devoid of the reassuring touchstones of everyday existence--familiar occupations and ordinary people. Collins dispenses with the domestic hearth completely in Armadale. Love and marriage provide only suffering and treachery; home is never a refuge.

While Miss Gwilt threatens the happiness of Miss Milroy and Allan Armadale, the Milroy family can hardly be held up as an example of respectable domesticity to counteract the threat she poses. Lydia threatens from without, but the Milroy family has a demon within, in the form of Mrs. Milroy, a respectable wife and mother whose jealousy rises to madness as she contemplates revenging herself upon Miss Gwilt. Major Milroy retreats from his wife's rage to his clock-building. Their daughter, neglected

¹⁴ Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 20.

by both parents, plans to elope with Armadale. None of this is very reassuring in terms of the moral stability of family life.

But then, all of the characters in Armadale seem to have lost touch with reality; each is enslaved by his own obsession. Midwinter is controlled by Armadale's dream, Miss Gwilt is preoccupied with revenge, Mrs. Milroy is devoured by jealousy and the pathetic Bashwood is enslaved by Miss Gwilt. Armadale avoids responsibility, and Pedgift, Jr. spies on everyone. Beside all of these, Major Milroy's obsession with clocks seems a miracle of sanity. However, in Armadale, Collins provides no havens for these lost and unhappy characters, even at the end of the book.

Realizing that Midwinter rather than Armadale is about to become her victim, Lydia Gwilt sacrifices her life to save the man she loves. Having dealt mercilessly with others, ultimately she is caught in her own web. Unable to integrate her capacity to love with her predisposition to hate, she must suffer this expiation of her guilt. Her own death by the poison she has prepared for Armadale is a neat piece of poetic justice; yet it is powerfully drawn, her suicide a final triumph of love over hate and revenge. It is not a mere melodramatic victory of good over evil; plenty of evil remains flourishing at the end of Armadale. As Mr. Pedgift writes of Dr. Le Doux:

. . . . as to Retribution overtaking him, I can only heartily hope Retribution may prove, in the long run, to be the more cunning customer of the two. . . . In this enlightened nineteenth century, I look upon the doctor as one of our rising men. (IX, 565)

Having emancipated his heroine, Collins didn't really know what to do with her. The picaresque villainess was now too highly developed to be put back in the home. Miss Gwilt lacks the attributes of the feminine ideal, the most important of which was a submissive devotion to husband and children. "I wonder if I should have loved my children if I had ever had any?" (IX, 145) wonders Lydia. Probably not, is the answer which immediately occurs to the reader. The idea of Lydia Gwilt masquerading as the "angel in the house" is simply ridiculous. And so, having created this fascinating and enigmatic lady, Collins was obliged to kill her off: "Miss Gwilt's death quite upset me," he wrote to his mother.¹⁵

Never again did Collins create a heroine whom he could not place by her own fireside at the end of the story. In the portrayals of his later and lesser heroines, Collins seems to have lost heart. They are victims of society who never seem to become human beings; only partly liberated, they are always searching for stability. Ultimately, they suffer untimely deaths or surrogate salvations, and the price of salvation is usually the suppression of ability and the sacrifice of independence to a life spent seeking satisfaction in the happiness of others.

¹⁵ Robinson, p. 190.

An example of the sacrificial heroine is to be found in The Law and the Lady (1875) a readable but relatively unknown later work of Collins'. The heroine, Valeria Macallan, reverses the chivalric pattern and crusades on behalf of a gentleman in distress, in this case her weak, undeserving, and ungrateful husband, Eustace. Valeria carries her campaign through single-handedly to the point of success; but at that point she is forced to choose between the achievement of her goal and her husband's wish that she abandon her quest.

Shortly after her marriage Valeria discovers that her husband Eustace has been tried in a Scottish court and acquitted of the murder of his first wife. Although he is innocent, Eustace has accepted the verdict of "not proven" rather than "not guilty," and is content to live the rest of his life under a cloud of suspicion. He assumes that once Valeria discovers his secret, she will wish their marriage to end. This proves not to be the case. Valeria wants to find the real murderer and thus clear her husband's name. She is informed, however, (typically, by Eustace's mother) that he views with horror the "idea of inquiring anew into the circumstances which attended the lamentable death of his first wife. It makes no difference to

him that [she] is only animated by a desire to serve his interests" (V, 488). In defiance of Eustace, Valeria determines to go ahead: "Many another woman before me has faced serious difficulties and has conquered them--for the sake of the man she loved" (V, 161). So Valeria is established as a wife first and a detective second; the story becomes less a murder mystery than a study of the effects of social stigma upon a marriage, in effect, another treatment of the domestic scene.

To succeed, Valeria must work outside the law, an amateur doing a professional's job following the pattern of Marian Halcombe in The Woman in White. As in that novel, and in No Name, the existing structure of the law is unable to deliver justice to the oppressed. As the Scots lawyer patronizingly remarks: "The light which the whole machinery of the Law was not able to throw on the poisoning case at Gleninch has been accidentally let in on it by a Lady who refuses to listen to reason and who insists on having her own way" (V, 373). Love thus proves to be above the law; it is in fact a law unto itself and by extension, the domestic ideal dwarfs the moral and social framework which contains it. This was nothing new. Dickens had argued the inadequacy of the law years before in Bleak House (1853) and Little Dorrit (1857). But Collins overthrows the order of justice and reason and elevates in its place the qualities of mercy and love. The Lady is of far more interest to the author and reader than is the Law.

But no matter how much Valeria's femininity and wifely solicitude are emphasized, being a detective is not a woman's job. It is all right for Walter Bartright to crusade on behalf of injured womanhood, but for Valeria to do the same for injured manhood is a role-reversal which her old friend Benjamin cannot accept. In return for her suggestion that he open his mind to the "new ideas," Valeria is subjected to a tirade:

"By all manner of means let us have the new ideas. The old morality's all wrong, the old ways are all worn out. . . . Nothing comes amiss to the age we live in. The wife in England, the husband in Spain, married or not married, living together or not living together--it's all one to the new ideas." (V, 433)

Although the old man is gently mocked for his old-fashioned ideas, one feels that he is probably a spokesman for the conventional side of the author. Valeria's attitudes and activities are constantly tested against Benjamin's inflexible moral values.

Another way in which Collins undermines his heroine's achievements is by involving her with Misserimus Dexter, the fascinating madman whose conversations with Valeria provide a counterpoint of anti-feminist statements:

"As a rule, women are incapable of absolutely concentrating their attention on any one occupation for any given time . . . Women are infinitely superior to men in the moral qualities which are the true adornments of humanity. Be content--oh, my mistaken sister, be content with that!" (V, 332)

This reactionary tendency in Collins causes trouble. It keeps him from presenting the workings of his heroine's mind consistently, although the book is written from her point of

view. She is a loving wife, but when the occasion demands, can act in a headstrong manner. Throughout most of the novel she is the counterpart of such logical, clever self-possessed women as Marian Halcombe and Magdalen Vanstone. Valeria's possession of these characteristics is not what disturbs the reader. The problem is that Collins wants to preserve the female ideal, to keep one of Valeria's feet in each camp. He wants her to exemplify the woman who will "venture, suffer and do" all for the man she loves; yet for her to achieve success, she must be liberated to do a man's job of investigation. This means he must allow her to enjoy unhampered the same excitement, satisfaction and rewards that a man would enjoy, and if necessary, use unladylike means to achieve a socially desirable end.

Collins' inability to allow his heroine this freedom of movement falsifies the tone of the story. Valeria decides to ignore Eustace's wishes that her investigations cease, because she is close to success. But this decision taken, she hastens to assure the reader that she "had been well brought up, and ought to have known better. You who read this shameful confession would have known better, I am sure. You are not included, in the Prayer-book category, among 'the miserable sinners'" (V, 491). This kind of artificial remorse strikes the reader as unconvincing and distasteful. We are convinced that Valeria is proud of her crusade on behalf of her husband and that she is really exhilarated by the challenge. Upon undertaking the investigation she announces that she feels "a new woman, with a

new mind" (V, 244). Thus it grates on us to hear her assure us later, that she feels herself "blush for her own headstrong resistance" (V, 382). When she coyly comments: "I wonder when I look back on it at my own obstinacy," and confesses that warnings "only made me more and more eager to have my own way" (V, 381), we feel that she is protesting too much, that she is actually proud of her achievements and is deceiving herself and us. All this self-abnegation contributes to an image of Valeria as a contradictory and illogical woman, an image that might have conformed to contemporary ideas about the female mind, but one which only confuses and irritates today's reader.

It is of course possible that Collins means us to see Valeria as a woman in a position of genuine conflict; she must choose between her mission or her marriage. She decides that the domestic ideal must not be lost sight of in crusading for her husband and, indirectly, for female equality. She must choose between two courses which are morally right: the assertion of female potential for successful action in a man's world, or the guarantee of the personal happiness of a loved one; the "new ideas" or the moral order she is committed to uphold. She capitulates to the latter:

How could I resist? It was all over. . . . I was saying adieu to the one cherished ambition, the one dear and noble hope of my life. I knew it--and I said Yes. And so good-bye to the grand struggle! And so welcome to the new resignation which owned I had failed. (V, 422)

Thus Valeria sacrifices her achievements to the domestic ideal, and what is even more distressing, at the behest of a weak and

selfish partner.

VI

Although he explored new directions in character analysis and narrative style, Collins' novel endings are not greatly original; the conventional rewards and punishments are distributed to the appropriate characters as the curtain falls. But as Winifred Hughes suggests:

The values of Esther Summerson's vine-covered cottage in the country, which Dickens feels obliged to affirm in the end, are vitiated in the sensation novel. While the cottage itself is frequently enough supplied, its inhabitants are likely to be the former bigamists, adventuresses and even prostitutes . . . whom Dickens could not have pardoned.¹⁶

Furthermore, Collins' adulteresses get an awfully good run for their money before they settle down. The modern reader does not begrudge them respectable status after their struggle to rehabilitate themselves. It is the imposition of the "angel in the house" image on clever and courageous heroines like Magdalen Vanstone, Marian Halcombe and Valeria Macallan that rankles.

This attempt to force an unconventional personality to conform suddenly to the restrictions of the domestic ideal, to have the breath of rebellion cut off by the stay-laces of convention, causes a tension between what is original in

¹⁶ Winifred Hughes, The Maniac in the Cellar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. x.

Collins' material and the outmoded form in which he embodies it. Even when the message of the novel (and the message is only too painfully apparent in the later books) suggests that radical social change is needed, Collins seems unwilling or unable to accept the implications of his message. Perhaps an innate pessimism denied him the vision of a brave new social system; perhaps the world of Armadale frightened more than it fascinated. Whatever the reason, the result is that Collins is in the awkward position of using his heroines to attack social injustice, yet expecting these same women to accept immersion in conventional society as a reward for fighting a good battle.

Although he deals honestly with the complex personalities of his heroines, Collins too often abandons them on the brink of "real" heroism, that is, the tragic heroism that might more realistically be the result of the complexity of motive and personality he has created. The domestic ideal becomes a kind of good conduct prize for unconventional women who finally accept conventional standards of behavior. Collins forces them to renounce heroism "for the repentance of a happy marriage, [and] they collapse into suicidal self-effacement."¹⁷ When this happens, as it does in No Name and The Law and the Lady, the reader feels cheated; he senses a frustrating lack of poetic justice and the ending becomes a sentimental anti-climax. As Andrew Lang commented about the sudden metamorphosis of the

¹⁷ Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 206.

rebellious and angry Magdalen Vanstone into a submissive and loving wife, " . . . we might have preferred for her an end tragic and desperate rather than the haven to which she came."¹⁸

Most of Collins' heroines are social outcasts, counterparts of their Newgate predecessors; yet most are presented as at least potential representatives of the domestic ideal. In attempting to find a legitimate place in conventional society for heroines of dubious morality, Collins was in conflict with the cherished Victorian ideal, the wife and mother as "angel in the house." For herein lay a world of moral ambiguity. How was the term "heroine" to be defined when dealing with women such as Lydia Gwilt and Magdalen Vanstone? These women could be considered heroines in the traditional sense only by those readers ready to accept Paul Clifford's earlier quoted assertion that he was more sinned against than sinning. That society should ultimately allow its female rebels and victims the protection and respectability of hearth and home was a concession that many Victorian readers were unwilling to make:

Mr. Wilkie Collins has chosen, by way of making his heroine piquant and interesting . . . to throw her into a career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness . . . from all the pollutions of which she emerges at the cheap cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines. . . . Her pollution is decorous, and justified by law; and after all her endless deceptions it seems quite right to the author that she should be restored to society, and have a good husband and a happy home.¹⁹

¹⁸ Andrew Lang, "Mr. Wilkie Collins' Novels," The Contemporary Review, (Jan.-June, 1890), p. 25.

¹⁹ Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, unsigned review, Blackwood's Magazine, xciv, (August, 1863), p. 170.

This was true. To Collins it did seem right that his heroines should take their places in society; after all, there was no alternative but death. The place for a woman in Victorian society was in a domestic establishment, either her own or someone else's. While changes were coming and some of the early stirrings of unrest are apparent in the sensation novel, as yet the times were out of joint for the feminist. Sexual relationships in Collins' novels may not be legitimized by the marriage ceremony, his characters may divorce and remarry, and his illegitimate children fight for their rights, but he is still unwilling to dispense with marriage as the ultimate goal and refuge for his heroines.

Collins exhibited this blend of the rational with the romantic in his own unconventional life (if the keeping of two mistresses simultaneously can be referred to so prosaically). Although he never married either woman and each knew of the other's existence, he seems to have enjoyed thirty years of more or less harmonious domesticity. Nevertheless, there was doubtless a price to pay by all parties for these unconventional relationships. Collins was interested in more liberal divorce laws, but how much he was actually willing to concede along these lines is suggested by a passage in The Evil Genius:

Where there is absolute cruelty, or where there is deliberate desertion, on the husband's part, I see the use and reason for Divorce. . . . But, where the husband's fault is sexual frailty, I say the English law which refuses Divorce on that ground alone is right. . . . Religion, which rightly condemns sin, pardons it on the condition of true repentance. Why is a wife not to pardon it for the same reason? (XIV, 459)

For all his championing of the outcast and rebellious female, Collins appears to accept a traditional and romantic view of the capacities and proper function of women, while at the same time disliking and distrusting the "ceremony called marriage."

In accordance with the romantic side of the author, most of his heroines, both fallen and respectable, do "complete" their lives by promising to love, honour and obey. This conventional side of Collins, the side that describes female perfection as embodied in a woman "who can't talk and who can cook," is loath to allow even his respectable heroines to flout convention with impunity. Marian Halcombe and Magdalen Vanstone both suffer complete physical breakdowns as a result of their forays into a man's world; and the achievements of both are ultimately dependent on the inspiration and support of men, Hartright and Wragge respectively. This, after all, is what the opening words of The Woman in White would lead us to expect: "This is the true story of what a woman's patience can endure, and of what a man's resolution can achieve" (I, 7). Valeria Macallan is the one heroine who carries through her campaign for justice single-handedly; yet even her achievements are insidiously undermined by the author and she is made to abandon her efforts just at the point of success.

Valeria and her creator are caught in a period of transition. The age of the helpless heroine is over; intelligence and determination are qualities that can no longer be confined to the villainess. But Collins, fascinated by the resolute heroine

who has rejected, or at least reinterpreted, her traditional role in society, at the same time sees her as a threat to society's most stable unit, the family. The hero eclipsed by the resolute heroine, produces in Collins an intense anxiety; the "angel," attempting to fill the hero's aggressive role, may become an angel of death like Hester Dethridge and destroy her husband. Nina Auerbach suggests that women represented a demonic threat to the Victorian male, and that pressure upon women to remain in their traditionally passive roles was a response by a male-dominated society to this perceived threat.²⁰ The domestic havens that Collins provides for his resolute heroines would seem to support her theory; certainly the implications inherent in Collins' depiction of diminished heroes and assertive heroines are not translated into social realities at the end of the novels. The books express the weakened paternalism of the mid-nineteenth century, yet the stereotype of the submissive wife is ultimately affirmed. Collins only flirts with the idea that his butterflies should be free; he cannot practically ensure their sustenance once liberated. At the same time he is unwilling to relinquish the comfort and security provided by women in their traditional roles. His heroines must wait, poised for flight and beating their wings impatiently against the bars.

²⁰ Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 34.

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