

The WOMAN in WHITE by Wilkie Collins

For our March 2025 meeting we have chosen a book which first appeared in Charles Dickens weekly periodical *All the Year Round* where it ran from November 1859 until August 1860. The novel was published in three volumes in 1860. It was a great success - Gladstone put off a theatre party in order to read it, and Thackeray sat up all night to finish it. The progress of the plot became a dinner table topic and bets were struck on the outcome of this or that situation. Collins received letters from single men demanding to know the identity of the original for his heroine Marian Halcombe, and if she would accept their hand in marriage. In 2025 we may be bombarded with 'Merch' to go with every new entertainment, but it could be said to have all begun here – In 1860 a merchandising industry geared up to cash in on the popularity of the novel. Loyal fans could spray themselves with *Woman in White perfume*, wrap up in *Woman in White cloaks and bonnets* and dance to the various *Woman in White waltzes and quadrilles*..

If *The Moonstone*, also by Wilkie Collins, was the first great detective novel, *The Woman in White* might lay claim to being the greatest mystery thriller to be written (the first 'sensation' novel), holding its readers' rapt attention from the first appearance of the "The Woman" until the end.

In Wilkie Collins preface to the 1860 edition he wrote: "An experiment is attempted in this novel, which has not (so far as I know) been hitherto tried in fiction. The story of the book is told throughout by the characters of the book. They are all placed in different positions along the chain of events; and they all take the chain up in turn, and carry it onto the end. If the execution of this idea has led to nothing more than the attainment of mere a novelty of form, I should not have claimed a moments attention for it in this place. But the substance of the book, as well as the form, has profited by it. It has forced me to keep the story constantly moving forward, and it has afforded my characters a new opportunity of expressing themselves, through the medium of the written contributions which they are supposed to make to the progress of the narrative."

Plot summary

Walter Hartright, a young drawing master, is walking home on a beautiful moonlit night, he hears a cry of distress and sees a beautiful woman, dressed in white, fleeing from pursuers. This actually happened to Collins and the woman was Caroline Graves, with whom he went on to have a relationship, but the incident was surely the inspiration for *The Woman in White*. The plot has it all – madness, incarceration, mind-control, fraud, organised crime, murder – yet, despite this, the story always keeps just on the right side of melodrama. *The Woman in White* also has the best heroine in English literature. Marian Halcombe is clever, witty and incredibly resourceful. She also keeps a diary which the villain, the equally wonderful Count Fosco, not only reads but *writes in*. Like *The Moonstone* the story is told from many viewpoints, including "The Narrative of the Tombstone" *If you have not previously read this novel it would be unfair to say more and spoil the revelations to come.*

Wilkie Collins (1824 – 1889)

Wilkie Collins was the elder son of William Collins the celebrated landscape artist and portrait painter. His childhood schooldays began in 1835 at the Maida Hill Academy, followed by a two year interruption when he accompanied his parents and younger brother, Charles to France and Italy from September 1836 to August 1838. He later recalled that he had learned more in Italy 'which has been of use to me, among the scenery, the pictures, and the people, than I ever learned at school.' He also claimed that he had fallen in love for the first time in Rome at the age

of 12 or 13. Returning to England, his schooling continued at Cole's boarding school at 39 Highbury Place. It was here that he began his career as a storyteller to appease the dormitory bully, later recalling that 'it was this brute who first awakened in me, his poor little victim, a power of which but for him I might never have been aware.'

Wilkie left school in 1841 and was apprenticed to the tea merchants Antrobus & Co. in the Strand. It was here, in what he called 'the prison on the Strand' that he began his writing with his first signed publication, 'The Last Stage Coachman' appearing in Douglas Jerrold's *Illuminated Magazine* in August 1843. From May 1846 Collins became a law student at Lincoln's Inn and was called to the bar in 1851. He never practised his profession although several lawyers feature prominently in his subsequent novels.

During the 1850s Wilkie's main income was derived from journalism with numerous contributions to *Bentley's Miscellany*, *The Leader* and more particularly Dickens's *Household Words*. He had first met Dickens in 1851. A firm friendship developed between the two writers which lasted until Dickens's death in 1870. They often travelled together on the Continent to France and Italy, and Wilkie became a frequent visitor to Dickens's homes at Tavistock House and Gad's Hill where he was encouraged to fulfil his theatrical ambitions.

The real life woman in white (Caroline Graves) probably met Wilkie in the spring of 1856. She was a widow, originally came from Gloucestershire, and had a young daughter, Harriet Elizabeth (usually known as Carrie). Caroline and Wilkie never married but lived together from about 1858 for the best part of 30 years.

About 1864, however, he met the other woman in his life (Martha Rudd). Wilkie had turned 40 while Martha was just 19. By 1868 she was installed at 33 Bolsover Street within walking distance of his other more impressive household at 90 Gloucester Place in order to give their liaison a degree of respectability. They never married, but assumed the identities of Mr and Mrs William Dawson, the name given to their three children, Marian, Harriet and Charley.

Whether Martha's arrival caused the temporary rift between Wilkie and Caroline, or whether she simply gave him an ultimatum over marriage is uncertain, but in October 1868 Caroline suddenly married one Joseph Clow. Carrie and Frank Beard were the witnesses while Collins was himself present at the ceremony in Marylebone Parish Church. By April 1871, however, Caroline had returned to Gloucester Place and continued to live with Wilkie until his death in 1889.

Despite his growing success, Collins's health began to decline during the 1850s and 1860s, suffering from what he always described as 'rheumatic gout' or 'neuralgia'. These affected his eyes with particular severity and he often needed the services of a secretary. He visited numerous physicians and tried various remedies including Turkish and electric baths, Health spas, hypnotism and quinine. Ultimately he was prescribed opium in the form of laudanum as a pain-killer and sedative, but always for purely medical reasons. Over the years Collins developed an enormous tolerance and eventually took daily 'more laudanum than would have sufficed to kill a ship's crew or company of soldiers'.

During the 1880s his health continued to decline. In January 1889 he was involved in an accident and thrown from a cab by the force of the collision. There followed a severe attack of bronchitis. He suffered a stroke on 30 June and with further complications died on 23 September.