
Image-Texts in *The Woman in White*

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In November 1859 Wilkie Collins published the first issue of *The Woman in White*. The novel was a blockbuster success; reviews of it filled the literary journals, and by November 1860 the novel had already gone through eight editions. *The Woman in White* retains its reputation today and is regarded by many current critics as having ushered in a decade of popular sensation fiction and introducing detective fiction to Victorian readers. This decade of sensational literature coincided with an absolute explosion of visual media in printed texts. General access to images achieved unprecedented rates during the middle of the nineteenth century. Newspapers, periodicals, and stationary store windows provided cheap, plentiful access to illustrated texts, as did circulating libraries, reading rooms, and advertisements. Publications of all kinds, ranging from gift books to encyclopedias, included images as a means of attracting a larger market, but economic and aesthetic pressures to accompany fiction with pictures were most firmly concentrated among part-issue publications and the journals and magazines that produced stories, general interest articles, essays, and histories. Journals such as *Blackwood's Magazine*, *The Cornhill Magazine*, *Once a Week*, and *Punch* regularly used illustrations as a major attraction and selling point. *Once a Week*, for instance, included 169 images in its inaugural issue in an attempt to establish high numbers of subscribers (Goldman 54-55).

It may seem odd to discuss *The Woman in White* within this larger context of visual media, given that the novel was originally serialized within the pages of Charles Dickens' unillustrated weekly *All the Year Round*. Unlike many mid-century novels, such as those produced by Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, or Trollope, *The Woman in White* did not have accompanying illustrations. This is not to say, however, that *The Woman in White* did not include any images at all. Details such as signatures, a copy of a death certificate, and a reproduction of a tombstone engraving cause a number of the narratives double as readable images. These image-texts are "The Narrative of Hester Pinhorn," "The Narrative of the Doctor," "The Narrative of Jane Gould," and "The Narrative of the Tombstone." Collins' incorporation of these materials raises some interesting questions: why did he choose these narratives and not any of the other, seemingly more important ones?

How did mid-Victorian readers perceive and engage with these image-texts? How did these image-texts help redefine reading for Victorian audiences as a specifically visual process? And in what ways did these images deliberately address Victorian definitions of literary realism?

Part of *The Woman in White's* allure for Victorian readers was almost certainly its complicated plot. Walter Hartright, the hero of the novel, falls deeply in love with the wealthy Laura Fairlie. Their romance is thwarted when Walter discovers that Laura has promised to marry a much older man. She commits to this loveless marriage, only to repent of it later when her desperate husband inter her in a mental asylum after he fakes her death. The novel tracks the plot concocted by Laura Fairlie's husband Sir Percival Glyde and his friend Count Fosco, as they attempt to disinherit Laura by establishing her as legally dead. Walter, in the meantime, works tirelessly with Laura's half-sister Marian to uncover and reveal this damaging conspiracy. All ends well, of course, as Laura's legal identity is resurrected and Walter and Laura marry happily.

The Woman in White's somewhat unwieldy plot, with its revelations of illegitimacy, conspiracy, murder, and forgery, immediately came under fire from contemporary critics. Critics of sensation fiction helped spread the view that sensation fiction was unrealistic and overly fanciful. Henry Mansel, writing in 1863, argued that sensation literature was "written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence" and that these novels "have recourse to rapid and ephemeral methods of awakening the interest of their readers, striving to act as the dram or the dose, rather than as the solid food" (482). Sensation novelists, for their part, regularly retorted that they drew their inspiration from the daily newspaper headlines and real-life events. John G. Millais asserted that *The Woman in White* was based on Collins' encounter with an actual woman dressed in white. According to the younger Millais, his father and Collins met the woman on the street just after she escaped from a man who had "subjected her to threats and 'mesmeric influences'" (281). Although the story is almost certainly apocryphal, it is clear that defenders went to great lengths to establish sensation fiction's connections to contemporary, real events. Thus, reader responses to sensation and detective fiction of the 1860s contributed to a much larger Victorian debate about how to define literary realism. If many critics argued that the novels were thematically and structurally artificial, just as many readers and writers countered with claims that sensationalist literature was grounded in true and real events.

A large part of the problem of realism for *The Woman in White* and other sensation/detective novels was the tendency towards over-plotting, which was seen by many as overtly artificial. Alexander Smith, writing in 1863, complained that "every trifling

incident is charged with an oppressive importance: if a tea-cup is broken, it has a meaning, it is a link in the chain; you are certain to hear of it afterwards" (184). Such a complaint persists in modern criticism about Victorian realism and the sensation genre, as well. Walter M. Kendrick, for example, has argued that sensationalist authors turned fiction into a game, rather than mimetic representation, and that sensation fiction was "potentially subversive of the belief that fiction is and must be mimetic" (21). But if Collins' novel is truly a game, it seems to be a game about mimesis itself. The image-texts Collins included in his novel draw attention to themselves by virtue of their difference from all the other narratives included in the novel. In doing so, they cause the reader to question his or her reading processes and the means by which he or she accepts these image-texts as real, fake, fictional, or authentic. *The Woman in White*, therefore, simultaneously relies on images, both described and produced, as a means of authenticating its sensationalism even as it draws attention to the hyper-artificiality of those same images.

The Woman in White is a novel replete with copies and doubles, as many critics have noticed, the most famous of these being Laura Fairlie and her look-alike, Anne Catherick. The very structure of the novel parallels this interest in copies, since the entire text consists of supposed copies and transcripts of documents Walter has collected together. This unique narrative structure results in, as John Sutherland puts it, "a pseudo-documentary surface and a real-time chronology which teasingly negate the work's inner identity as fiction" (75). Less well recognized is the extent to which this "pseudo-documentary surface" is established through the typographic presentation of these narratives. This is a novel that is deeply interested in the presentation and reproduction of the documents that make up the story. The novel repeatedly describes both the content and appearance of the letters and narratives that are included. Editorial notes, for example, point out when a new narrator takes over, as well as the textual uniqueness that defines the new narrator's writing: both the characters and the editor often observe details about signatures and handwriting. Walter Hartright, for example, describes Anne Catherick's unsigned note as having been written in a "cramped, conventional copy-book character" (Collins 35: 190).¹ At the conclusion of Marian's diary, an editor's note tells the reader,

At this place the entry in the Diary ceases to be legible. The two or three lines which follow contain fragments of words only, mingled with blots and scratches of the pen. The last marks on the paper bear some resemblance to the first two letters (L and A) of the name of Lady Glyde. (52: 25)

The note continues by explaining that the next entry appears in "a man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular" (52: 25). We get a second

representation of Fosco's "bold" handwriting in the note he sends to Marian, which Hartright describes as concluding with "the initial letter F, surrounded by a circle of intricate flourishes" (59: 196). This interest in the physical representation of writing reaches an apex, of course, in Walter's discovery that Sir Percival has forged his parents' entry into the marriage register. Mrs. Catherick's unsigned letter even points out that Sir Percival "was some time getting the ink the right colour (mixing it over and over again in pots and bottles of mine), and some time afterwards in practicing the handwriting" (65: 341).

Given the novel's focus on what documents look like, as much as what they say, it is hardly surprising to discover that Collins experimented with the visual presentation of his own novel. Towards the middle of the story, Collins disrupts the longer narratives of Marian and Walter to include several short testimonies by important, although marginal characters. The narratives of Hester Pinhorn, Dr. Alfred Goodricke, Jane Gould, and the tombstone all conclusively establish the death of Laura Fairlie, wife of Sir Percival Glyde. Hartright carefully collects these narratives in order to prove to the reader the enormity of the crime, as well as to demonstrate the concrete and seemingly irrefutable public record of Laura's death. The documents will also eventually prove that Laura Fairlie's publicly declared death was in fact a plot concocted by Sir Percival and Count Fosco, since it is this set of documents that reveals the crucial discrepancy of dates between when Laura Fairlie left Blackwater Park and when she supposedly died. Thus, these narratives, unlike the more personal eyewitness accounts provided by characters like Walter and Dr. Gilmour, also function as legal documents. Since this set of narratives has the additional burden of acting as both legal proof and a retelling of events, Collins grants these testimonies an added layer of authenticating information. He creates this additional layer through the manipulation of visible, printed details of the text.

To begin with, the narratives of Hester Pinhorn, Dr. Goodricke, and Jane Gould all include an actual rather than implied signature. This signature is signaled by the editorial note "signed," to indicate that the name below should be read as the narrator's signature, witnessing his or her own document. These three narratives alone, out of a total of fourteen narratives that make up the entire novel, have the editorial note "signed"; all other narratives lack this important signifier. Moreover, the signatures of Dr. Goodricke and Jane Gould are rendered in italicized script as a means of visually reproducing a handwritten name. "The Narrative of Hester Pinhorn, Cook in the Service of Count Fosco" is further accompanied by the editorial note, "Taken down from her own statement" (56: 124). This narrative, provided by an illiterate woman, includes the following additional lines (the only of their kind to appear in the novel):

The above statement has been read over in my presence. I have nothing to add to it, or take away from it. I say, on my oath as a Christian woman, this is the truth.
(56: 126)

Hester's witnessing signature is reproduced not in an italicized script as can be found concluding the other two letters, written by literate authors. Instead, her signature is rendered as a small cross:

(Signed) HESTER PINHORN, Her + Mark. (56: 126)

"The Narrative of the Doctor" consists of a more developed image-text. This narrative is meant to be read as a reproduction of Laura Fairlie's death certificate after having been filled in and signed by Dr. Goodricke. Collins creates this "copy" by manipulating the difference between italicized and unitalicized script in order to indicate those parts of the letter that were "hand-written" by the doctor. The italicized portions of the document specify the legally important characteristics of the dead woman, Laura Fairlie, such as her name, her age, her birthday, and her date of death. The narrative even includes a small chart that identifies the cause of death and duration of disease, into which Dr. Goodricke has entered the appropriate information. This chart is followed by Dr. Goodricke's signature and his address, filled in neatly below his name (56: 126).

The public acceptance of Laura Fairlie's death is further verified by the inclusion of an image in "The Narrative of the Tombstone," which follows immediately after Jane Gould's narrative. In the original serialized version of the novel, Collins distinguished this narrative from all of the others in the novel by separating it typographically from the rest of the surrounding text. "The Narrative of the Tombstone" is contained within a box, uses a gothic style script to mimic the tombstone's engraved lines, and is not framed by any of the editorial details that accompany the other "Narratives," such as a signature or introductory note (56: 127). As with the Doctor's certificate, the "Narrative of the Tombstone" stands alone, functioning simultaneously as both image and text. The typographic alterations clearly signify that the reader is meant to understand these documents to be precise copies and to carry the same legal weight as the documents themselves. These narratives, therefore, provide testaments of reality beyond what the written word is capable of producing -- it is the *representation* of the copy, rather than the words alone, that validates Laura's death for the reader and, as Walter Hartright argues in his preamble, the legal court that reader represents.

The significance of these images within the context of the novel should not be overlooked. Collins is playing a sly game here, since these documents are simultaneously both real and artificial. The doctor's certificate, reproduced for

the reader to examine, has been legally certified and accepted publicly. And yet both the certificate and the tombstone, while accepted as real and authentic, are wholly inaccurate. They become indicators of a reality entirely manufactured by Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde; despite what these documents declare, Lady Glyde, wife of Sir Percival, did not die on July 28th, 1850 in St. John's Wood. This fascination with the potential of image-texts to produce a convincing but false reality parallels, of course, the central mystery of the novel: Sir Percival's forgery of his parents' marriage register. Indeed, the entire novel seems consumed with suspicion of images, texts, and image-texts. Even the narratives discussed above are as patently false as they are convincingly real. After all, Hester Pinhorn's "signature" is nothing more than a simple cross, as was common practice for illiterate persons. Her signature is absolutely unidentifiable as hers, easily forged, and possesses no single unique characteristic. Likewise, the very signatures and images themselves are constructed quite simply by typographic modification—easily achieved with mid-century printing techniques. So, even as these narratives are constructed as image-texts so as to authorize and validate the fantastic events described, namely the death of Laura Fairlie, they also seem to highlight precisely how inaccurate and fake such images or such a constructed reality can be.

What are we to make of such graphic materials, then, given that they occupy such slippery ground between convincingly real and overtly artificial? To further increase difficulties, the image-texts themselves have proved to be singularly elusive. They have rarely appeared since their initial publication in the pages of *All the Year Round*. Readers of the original volume editions got on quite well without copies of the death certificate or the copy of the tombstone engraving. Even twentieth-century scholarly editions, to say nothing of the cheap paperback versions of this novel, only occasionally include reproductions of these images. Many modern readers are or were probably entirely unaware that such images were ever published, much less conceived of.

The loss of these image-texts from modern editions parallels a loss in our understanding of nineteenth-century experimentations in packaging novels to produce a specific kind of reading experience. *The Woman in White* is a very early example of how some genres of fiction, such as detective novels, used images to authenticate a narrative. These image-texts produced a mode of reading in which the reader is ironically aware of the fine line between fantasy and reality. We accept the image of the tombstone as a facsimile copy of the actual tombstone, even as we recognize that such a tombstone does not exist. Historian Michael Saler has identified this kind of reading as particularly prevalent in fantasy genres that appeared at the end of the century, such as science fiction, detective stories,

and New Romance novels. In writing about the *fin-de-siècle* popularity of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and H. Rider Haggard's novels, he states "those who use the ironic imagination do not so much willingly suspend their disbelief in fictional characters or worlds, as willingly believe in them with the double-minded awareness that they are engaging in pretence" (Saler 139). Collins' image-texts, quite simply, make visible this pretense.

The Woman in White, therefore, fits into a long continuum of Victorian novels and stories that experimented with an image/text duality as a means of negotiating readers' responses to the "realism" of their narratives. What is odd about *The Woman in White*, however, is that its images were far outside mainstream mid-Victorian publishing standards. That is, most serialized Victorian novels (particularly part-issue novels) consisted of pages of text accompanied by (typically) two full-page illustrations produced by a leading artist of the day. *The Woman in White* did not fall into this category. Victorian readers of this novel found themselves confronted not with the type of images that, even by 1859, would have seemed comfortable and familiar, but instead with images that demanded their readerly attention, engagement, and even criticism in new and complex ways. Wilkie Collins helped establish a convention in detective fiction for relying on image-texts as a means of forcing the reader to confront commonly held assumptions about genre, character, novelistic structure, and fictional realism. In doing so, Collins created a space in which the reader could enjoy an overtly artificial narrative ironically and engage with a complete work of fiction as though it were real. Wilkie Collins' novel has been handed down to our current generation as a work of entertaining fiction, famous largely for its experimental narrative structure. It is worth remembering, however, that Collins' experiments were not limited to the novel's structure alone, but also to its textual presentation. In publishing *The Woman in White* with its accompanying image-texts, Collins encouraged later generations of mystery and adventure writers to broaden the genre's ability to engage with the reader through a variety of media, both visual and textual.

Notes

¹ All references to *The Woman in White* are to the 1859-60 edition of the novel published serially in *All the Year Round*. This and all subsequent references give issue and page number.

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