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## FRAMING IDEAL: GENDER AND CLASS POLITICS IN WILKIE COLLINS' WOMAN IN WHITE

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### Abstract

After the rediscovery of Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* in the late twentieth-century as a text which is eligible for critical literary analysis, it has been subject to scrutiny by varied critics. Initially, as a periodical serial at a journal turned into a bestseller novel, it received remarkable responses from readers, as well as critics who delved into its pages. It brought about a new genre 'sensation fiction'; beguiling plot-centred novels, which focused on stories woven around criminals that also combines gothic elements with romantic fiction, which paved the nineteenth-century detective story, herewith studied by genre critics, however; it needs to be investigated considering gender and class politics by virtue of its salient engagement with women's representation and social formation; ergo, this study will serve as a critical paper of analysing Collins' novel in terms of gender and class politics.

**Keywords:** Wilkie Collins, Gender, Woman in White, Class Politics.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era is famed with its pernicious impacts on individuals as well as various improvements in many fields. Progress and turbulence caused by growing economy engendered *laissez-faire* system in which society was split into clear-cut categories; those with / without economic welfare, the privileged, the handicapped, and the pariah. This segmented texture of the society, of course, became a terrain for the literary parties of the day where they put pen to paper to project a textual image of it with its every aspect reflected on the pages. One of the famous authors amongst those who engaged themselves in writing at the said time was Wilkie Collins, the father of the modern detective novel, whose writings were of a hit for the period. Especially his novel *The Woman in White* which was serially published in a journal named *All the Year Round* by Charles Dickens and he acquired great success with that book.<sup>1</sup> It became one of the most significant examples of a new genre "sensation fiction"; mysterious events that creates scandals including murder, identity crisis, class conflicts and social anxieties enriched with Gothic elements in a

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<sup>1</sup> Luckhurst, Roger (2014).



realistic way.<sup>2</sup> The genre presents us a literary piece that canalizes itself principally to reader's nerves wherein it bases itself upon the reader's adrenaline on the conditions which hormones are hastened, blood circulation and metabolism are accelerated due to mysterious textual fear. Having followed in his Victorian contemporaries' steps, neither imitating nor disdaining them, with his aforesaid book *The Woman in White*, which I'll be looking at the remaining pages, Collins offers a diverged path that allows us to experiment both the physicality of the societal truths such as gender norms, class issues of the period, as well as stimulating our nervous system through fictional performance. Beyond its aestheticism, it contains a dynamic plot and well character-creation belonging different social classes by which their personas are shaped thoroughly, making that novel a piece for exploration of gender politics and class issues for a better understanding of the period's characteristics and Collins's perceptions of specified issues.

Obviously, the book succeeds in attracting its readers by its thrillingly woven plot and in-depth characterization, as congruously defined and multidimensional as it is, besides its document-based narration that unfolds via using court files narrated by a sole narrator who is the character, narrator and editor of the text – it might be argued that a way to prop the credibility of the narrator – that create lifelike immediacy of the sensation. Briefly, the story speaks to the skirmishes of two groups, one of them gathers around Sir Percival Glyde, an aristocrat, who efforts to keep a mystery unknown to others and passivate those who endeavour to uncover it, while the other group pursues to unveil the truth for the sake of Laura Fairlie supported by the narrator and others. Throughout the story, social status and gender conflicts are dominant, because all characters, I believe, need to belong to a social class and have a fixed gender, otherwise, they are subject to silencing and destruction. A controversial point that many critics have argued for silencing as a means for empowerment for women, however; I rather believe that whether Collins's silencing his women characters is an act of empowerment, or otherwise can be read in during and at the end of his fabrication of the two groups' struggle.

By foregrounding the social categorizations such as gender and class as mutually interdependent and intersecting realities in the characterization, by increasing credibility of the narrative via document-based narration, and by his unexpected and therefore thrilling plot ending, Collins sheds light on his personal views of social class ideology and gender which is the main focus of this paper that I aim at illuminating. Rather than encouraging the idea of silence as an empowerment of women, instead he lays stress on his sympathy for middle-class values reinforced with patriarchal norms in which spatial and personal existence of women is based on male control on both legal and social level, otherwise; they are subject to suppression and loss of identity. So, within the framework of the said points, I assume that social status whose stability is possible through middle-class values, and female characters must comply with it to exist both aesthetically and physically.

## 2. GENDERED BODY AND MIND

In the explication of gender and class politics, I shall consider them as overlapping categories owing to their intricately intersection which needs analysis of them interdependently rather than separately. Initially, since choice of the letters and words on the page whether they are uppercase or lowercase, colloquial or posh and the syntax to be seen as a novelistic disguise where author's intention may float latently, thus, as the case in *The Woman in White*, I shall start interpreting Collins's textual narrative dexterity. Beginning with a sentence indicating gendered viewpoint of his, "This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve" (Collins, 1859,1). I infer that since both "Woman" and "Man" words are vis-à-vis, uppercase letters standing for their essences, means women are supposed to tolerate and wait, whereas men are associated with judgment and reason. Accordingly, for Victorian ideals, women were required to be passive in order to be degraded to object positions of which they are devoid of acting unlike a subject. A clear tendency that women were both physically and intellectually neutralized, likewise Collins implies this astutely with the beginning sentence, propped with following female characters of the story are deprived of acting or suppressed, that he shares the Victorian expectations as he confines his female characters to limited dramatic performance – and withal female characters, who transgress are punished or suppressed, end up being submissive puppets of men.

At the intersection of class and gender, Collins suggests a paradigm for his views of class intermingled with gender via the representation of spatial areas where dwellings stand for the values by which in-dwellers are defined and categorized. Given the Collins's idea of the patriarchy as the core, if the

<sup>2</sup> Lyn Pykett (2011). *The Nineteenth Century Sensational Novel*.



order is to be maintained, the domestic spheres ought to comply with the Victorian norms, as well as the public, otherwise it causes disorder within the house. Of this proposition, the Limmeridge house, where Walter visits the Fairlies, is an example to picture how Collins supports patriarchy and middle-class ideology within domestic space. Limmeridge house is a cautionary paradigm in which only male character Mr. Fairlie is supposed to rule, whereas the situation is vice versa as Marian Halcombe dominates Laura Fairlie and supervises the house. Of each woman, we are hinted from Walter's depiction, "The lady's [Marian] 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; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes", I presume Collins cunningly describes Marian as very masculine unlike idealized Victorian woman, whereas Mr. Fairlie is the opposite with, "His feet were effeminately small, and were clad in buff-coloured silk stockings, and little womanish bronze-leather slippers" who refrains from governing the house (1859, 25, 32). The lack of male dominance in this inverted domestic sphere coupled with Marian's masculinity is obviously a paradigm that Collins refers to upcoming troubles since there is no legitimate ruler according to Victorian norms where a domestic sphere must yield itself to the control of patriarchy, however; as the case in this house, Marian is in the charge which makes her a potential threat for the patriarchal society with her masculinity and trenchancy.

No doubt, Collins not only presents female characters for aesthetic pleasure, he rather employs them to be the epitome of his views on gender; in a manner that he places each women into a position of object to deliver necessity of the conventionally determined gender categories apt to the Victorian culture and punishes if one transgresses beyond the set rules of gender. Therefore, as stated above, Collins presents Marian as the embodiment of his cynical conception towards women who transgresses the fixed gender expectation through her textual journey that includes her attempt to intervene in the narration and punishment. The self-centred and hyper-assertive character of Marian blessed with a domineering voice over others, while she is expected to occupy a limited space framed apt to male desire, makes her relatively libertine and hazard to the patriarchy. In my reading of Marian, I noted that her transgression is mostly on a verbal level where the physicality of her core masculine traits is embodied in her usage of macho language, "Crush it!" she said. "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!" that passage epitomizes her use of mannish words to suppress Walter's manhood with a masculine tongue which is unacceptable in patriarchy (1859, 61). The sheer masculinity in her sentences during exchange of words with others when she aims to dispose of people around her is more criminalized with her resistance to the Count Fosco, an aristocratic character, that foreshadows her pathetic end in the context of the narrative's account of Marian's development from masculine character to a weary servant.

Notably, Collins uses the Count Fosco to suppress Marian's masculine persona who is peculiarly active; during the exposition of her episodes, she threats androcentric language with her twisted parlance, venture to interfere men's business via sending letters, above all, through a personal diary of her, which is inherently private, Marian aims at forming the narrative. To the extent that Marian carries out transgression – her masculine language, interference in men's business and self-dependency as a paradigm – Collins ought to suppress her transgressive acts to bring his patriarchal views to the fore on the textual level. At this point, I believe, Marian's "rare courage" and "easy grace of style" diary, plays a crucial role in elucidation of her being punished for her transgressions (1859, 343). An inherently safe space for the Victorian women was their personal diaries where they can safely voice their thoughts when no other channels of communication were available. However, the way Marian presents her diary exceeds personal space and, I assume, it appears as an attempt to intermeddle in narrative that seems to render her an ability to move through Walter's narration as a subject since using a diary as a narrative medium can be seen as "a means of observation and memory, as a method of self-control, and as a way of marking and controlling time" (Tomas, 2012, 14). Rather than consolidating her intrapsychic thoughts on the diary as a private script, she offers an alternate self-imposed textual authority for an inclusive controlling on the narrative and it turns into the representational physicality of Marian's body and self. Thus, once the diary involves in the narration, it becomes surrogate for Marian on a textual level with the purpose that I believe Collins aims not to present a dialogism, but a redemption of a transgression as she struggles to reverse subject/object binary.

Associating "resolution" with men, it must be understood that Collins lays the pen determinedly in the male hand with authorization to put the reality into words or to act as authority who is supposed to be in the charge of the organization of narrative. Any attempt to alter or control it by a woman is an illegal act to subvert the fixed and determined gender codes that lead to the threat to the institutional patriarchal status quo, and thereby those who contravene that law must be disciplined. As is the case of Marian's, her



transgression reaches climax when she eavesdrops on the dialogue between the Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde from the outside of the room as if she sets to act like a authorial surveillance figure who subverts the order of narrative within a panopticon structure. As Gaylin suggests, "Eavesdropping-an improper activity on the border between inside and outside, private, and public-figures transgression in the novel. An eavesdropper steals the secrets of private life and control their dissemination in the public realm" that explains Marian's act as a trespass or intrusion to others' private spheres as well as situates herself on a metanarrative stream (Gaylin, 2001, 304). Significantly, upon this act, Marian falls ill and becomes a vulnerable doll at hands of the Count Fosco to whom she executed the transgressive act, and yet he is the one who silences Marian.

Instead of a model for an alternate narrative, the diary forms an intricate matrix of perusal praxis to illustrate how Collins uses Count Fosco to strip off Marian's voice from the narrative and degrades her to a puppet. When Marian is laid up with typhus, we witness Fosco's seizure of the diary which he regards "the opportunity of enjoying an unexpected intellectual pleasure. I refer to the perusal (which I have just completed) of this interesting Diary" (1859, 343). The reader may see the act as an inexpiable infraction of a lady's privacy while Fosco finds it "unspeakably gratifying to be able to" delve into the secrets of her which is ironical because it was Marian who eavesdrops on to get privileged over him, but it is vice versa (1859, 343). Her mind is peeked into which she was worried about "his mind is prying into mine, overcomes me at these times; and it overcame me now", an intrusion into a safe space of her where she surrenders herself to him (1859, 269). I believe Collins punishes Marian by depriving her of a safe terrain in return for her intervention in men's affairs that she is left of her agency, however; Fosco takes a step further and writes in Marian's diary. Reading and adding his postscript in the diary - an obvious abuse of privacy - which I deduce to have an encrypted code on a symbolic level in Roland Barthes's conception, the violation implies a sexual attack to Marian, whose body as well as self are transcoded in the diary in which Fosco's pen functions as a phallus penetrating a conjectural rape on the textual level as the reader witnesses for a purpose. As Collins pictures the ways Marian's fragmentary narrative derives its core from her gendered body that is built into the structure with the result that her narrative is gendered as well. So that I read this act of violating her privacy as a way to confine Marian's self and body to manifest the need for male agency because it's version of a feminized narrative agency unsettles the reader which is sorted out via narrative transition from Marian to Walter for a male-based discourse and agency.

Briefly, Collins takes the conventional expectations of the period into account by establishing the continuity of patriarchy on the narrative relevant to the Victorian norms. Fosco's remark in the diary is a cue for Collins's mockery of the vision that a woman is to be granted a safe space for her self free from domination of men; as is the case with Marian's, she is excluded from the narrative due to her transgression and domesticated into a passive Victorian dedicated woman.

### **3. RATIONALIZING THE MIDDLE-CLASS VALUES**

Class, like gender, has alike judgmental determination; hence, in other words, economic categorization, mutually interdependent with gender, leads to discrimination or privilege as well. It is observed, when Walter, the narrator, prepares to leave for Limmeridge House, his sister Sarah remarks, "Such distinguished people to know, and on such gratifying terms of equality too!" (1859, 11). Being treated as an upper-class person is something to be proud of which is critical because class has a role to determine identity and social status, it defines who the person is. Oscillating between class and gender, I believe absence of signs of each categorization is of more importance, it engenders disorder and tension as discerned in Walter's uneasy encounter with an unchaperoned lady on the street, "There, in the middle of the broad bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments" (1859, 15). This passage serves as a probe for the absence of social signs that causes tension as Walter describes her as "it": suggests that she has a liminal space where she doesn't fit any class or gendered expectation on the cultural context which means she's supposed to be at a domestic place rather than on the street, and yet, she transgresses the border that makes her very unusual. Furthermore, that following monologue provides a specular critique of this diegetic action, "touched by suspicion; not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life. [...] What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess" (1859, 15). This failure of propriety, as complies with Collins's view, echoes about the distress since she is indefinite that gives both narrator and reader innuendo of her being an alienated figure due to her inadaptability to any social class as a consequence of Walter's class-based world-view. I believe, Collins offers his perception behind his



admitted narrator to textualize the tension: by presenting the persona under disguise or ambiguity that leads to a lack of identification due to her exteriority to the social class.

Being conscious of belonging to a class appears essential condition in the infra-narrative of the novel, coupled with security of patriarchy, Collins constructs a matrix of economical stratification in which each male character is after for a stable social status by commodifying female body: what certainly Collins aims is, in the form of fiction, to rationalize his sympathy for middle-class ideology at the expense of reification of female bodies. To the extent of critics has dealt with female subjectivity in *The Woman in White* in terms of gender, they disregards the fact that that denied female subjectivity, which is determinedly fixed, becomes an object of desire neither sexually nor politically, it rather stands for the object of economy for behalf of male-centred system. This economic fetishization of female body demonstrates itself on the representation of the most feminized character Laura. She is an infant-like “sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel”, who is devoid of a voice to protect herself against conspiracy in which she seems to occupy a liminal space; rather than having a dramatic character, she appears to be a commercial object to obtain economic stability for Walter and Sir Percival owing to her inheritance (1859, 27). Laura epitomizes the discourse of “Most Woman have no Characters at all” without a self in the narrative and her in-betweenness that strip her of her female subjectivity as the result of Walter and Sir Percival’s conspiracy for economic status.<sup>3</sup>

Besides taking commodification of female body as the focal point, as mentioned, I read it as a class struggle between middle class and aristocracy which takes place by usurping female rights that Collins celebrates middle-class values, whereas he deliberately criticizes other social and economic formation that falls outside middle-class category through characterizations. As an example of Collins’s criticism of class, Mr. Fairlie can be perused as pseudo-representative of aristocracy. He is pictured quite negatively with his everlasting complaints and irritative hypochondria, coupled with his egomania and contempt to others, and he is defined by Walter as, “frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look—something singularly and unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man” (1859, 42). His fear of responsibility incarcerates him in an isolated room where he plays his quasi-aristocratic taste “in a narcissistic aestheticism of his own creation” (83) (May) by purchasing “Unique Rembrandt etching. [...] The Smudge” to be exhibited at “Mechanics’ Institution of Carlise” along with his name not for an artistic desire, but his aristocratic wannabe as Bourdieu denotes, “tastes to function as markers of ‘class’” (1859, 179).<sup>4</sup> That class-based-conscious tastes that Mr. Fairlie to perform his aristocracy which is derived from refined aestheticism to pave the way to be appreciated as having “high taste” is obviously an emulation of genuine aristocracy. Since “good taste” is regarded as a conferment of vision and background scholarship of accumulation of knowledge in music, painting, literature and politics, it is highly conceivable that to have a “good taste” determines your distinctive social codes, however; Mr. Fairlie is up to his neck in self-deception per se. Collins, thus, critically parodies aristocracy for their prolix contempt to others, and he criticizes their sloth and uselessness via Mr. Fairlie’s insubstantial physical fatigue which supposedly derives “on the nerves” (1859, 36). Given that his death at the end due to a “paralysis”, which he virtually suffers throughout the book, Collins connotes state of apathy the aristocracy in with the strike of a “paralysis”, and he exterminates the indolent and narcissist wing of aristocracy for the sake of middle-class Walter.

Collins’s critique of aristocracy is taken further in the explication of a duo of aristocratic villains, Sir Percival Glyde and his fiendish partner, the Count Fosco. The aristocracy in question is not only a pesky disgrace of inertia and egoism exemplified with Mr. Fairlie, Collins employs Glyde and Fosco, who settle a conspiracy against women for financial profit, in order to picture the degeneracy and corruption of aristocracy. They fundamentally “both wanted money” Laura Fairlie’s inherits on Mr. Fairlie’s death through marriage of Glyde and Laura, who becomes utterly a chattel, under coverture if she is proclaimed dead (1859, 614). As their story is woven, the reader is shown Collins’s version of aristocracy in the process of transformation from fraudulent nobles into Machiavellian personas who manipulate people, middle-class values, and venerable marriage institution. I believe it is critical that Collins establishes a link between depravity of aristocracy and spatiality of the “Blackwater Park”, an old gloomy castle just “the exact opposite of Limmeridge” which “seems to be shut in-almost suffocated” with its scattered wings wherein Laura and Marian are detained for financial benefits (1859, 220). The place, with its all oppressive aura, becomes an insanity asylum for each woman being incarcerated as the consequence of the said duo’s wicked

<sup>3</sup> Pope, Alexander (1744).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (2005). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. P. 2.



objective. It is, I regard, crucial to state that we shall analyse Glyde considering him on account of illegitimacy; he is an usurper of an identity he's not given by law, rather he is an illegitimate progeny of Sir Felix Glyde, coupled with unlawful claustration of the two ladies, that sets a correlation between his made-up identity and the "Blackwater Park" which I'd consider them mutually self-referential. Legitimacy and moral tenets exclusively provide order and stability within a Victorian household; and that, whensoever these principles are enervated or delegitimized by contrivance, a *deus ex machina* is to ensure justice, it undoes what is illegitimate or morally lacking, just as is the case of Glyde's. With Collins's perspective he is doubly depraved: firstly, he claims to be the person who he is actually not by usurping an identity through a forged puerperal document, and secondly, he abuses marriage institution which was highly sacred as he incarcerates his wife to declare a counterfeit death for her inherited wealth. Given these, the Blackwater park is transformed into the terrain of corruption as it is an illegal possession which threatens the value of domestic sphere and becomes correlated with Glyde's "mean, cunning, and brutal [...] duplicity", in a place where order is at stake and never undone (1859, 287). Like Marian's, I note Glyde's irreversible transgressions denote an assault on the Victorian principles that scandalizes the morality of the society, and that, wicked deeds to be punished. Thus, Collins, with Glyde's ironical death in the fire at the church's chamber where his birth registration is kept at and he both metaphorically and literally loses his identity, punishes his transgressions, and ensures the removal of decadent illegitimacy and a threat for traditional system caused by his being fraud of his real identity.

Glyde's partner in the conspiracy the Count Fosco is a self-serving amoral aristocrat along with his being Epicurean of potation who prioritizes his shrewdness to have authority over everything. "The rod of iron with which he rules" is a marker of his imperious character who "could tame anything" in order to implement his own twisted law (1859, 239). Collins uses him to deconstruct the corruption and monstrosity of aristocracy through his discourses and deeds as he utters, "If Anne Catherick had not died when she did, what should I have done? I should, in that case, have assisted worn-out Nature in finding permanent repose", indicating his alacrity to quicken a death, more importantly praises his evil acts "At immense personal sacrifice I followed the dictates of my own ingenuity, my own humanity, my own caution, and took her identity instead" (1859, 570, 571). He indeed "took her [Laura] identity" through an illegal scam by locking Laura up in the dungeon and driving her outwardly insane: an insanity which is a backlog outlook of men's vision and crime that strips Laura of her identity, so the state of insanity is used by him to manipulate legal laws and the rights of a lady for his financial interests (1859, 612). In spite of his masculine and malefactor character, he has characteristic flaws as Marian states, "he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us [women]." that indicates his ironic inability to control his own body and mind as a feature of aristocracy (1859, 250). Beyond his devilish character, what Collins attempts to do in the context of the count's account is encoded in his being an outsider as an Italian who doesn't belong to the British realm, and that, exposure of "his vocation in life was the vocation of a spy" by which I conceive it as a censure of hypocrisy due to speciousness of appearance and real identity of the aristocrats which are fundamentally rested on lies (1859, 578). Compared to the other aristocrats, he gets murdered with a strike of a dagger "over his heart" even though he "had disguised him as a French artisan", and his naked body "lay, unowned, unknown, [...] There was the dreadful end of that long life of degraded ability", picturing the collapse of aristocracy due to their transgressions of the social order and manipulating the truth (1859, 643).

The structural narrative function of Mr. Fairlie, the Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde in the book is entirely antagonistic in its excess; however, its criticism comes into question in its reciprocal comparison with an alternative, that is, middle-class social and moral codes as Collins sublimes through the narrator, Walter Hartright. He is, "teacher of drawing, aged twenty-eight years", a person of a real "good taste" owing to his artistic background, presented as the most sympathetic character to the reader with his "and common honour" throughout the narrative as the idealized embodiment of middle-class values which makes him heroic rival to unscrupulous aristocrats - Fosco and Glyde (1859, 6, 539). This struggle between Hartright on one side, and Fosco and Percival on the other: a microcosm of the class war Collins aims at relating Hartright with virtue and bravery against immoral Fosco and Glyde, thus "Collins shifts moral values from the landed upper classes to the merchant class" as the story unfolds to an end with the rising of Walter suggesting consolidation of middle-class, and the downfall of aristocracy at the end (Finley, 2016, 5). An obvious attempt to differentiate the middle class from the aristocracy in terms of socioeconomic distinctions, as well as moral values, that Collins claims probity and virtue are inherently present in the middle-class, not in the aristocracy by giving a portrayal of a self-made middle-class artist's triumph over aristocracy.



Critically, Collins weaves Walter's narration around a dignified quest to rescue a damsel in distress against an illegitimate conspiracy with the purpose to undo it under the assurance of legality to "present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" since it is "story of an offence against the laws" addressing to the reader directly with an emphasis that "As the Judge might once have heard, so the Reader who is supposed to take his place" (1859, 4). Notably, the reader is let to learn of this being a formal declaration in court based on the statutory authority of the "Judge" to consolidate the credibility of his narration, of which he is both narrator, editor, and character of the story who is privileged to "be heard first" (1859, 4). Collins, obviously, allows him to be in the charge of the narrative that promises an extraterritoriality of him free from any form of narrative limitations with a claim of absolute authority on the text; I believe, Collins waives his authorship to establish a textual terrain in which Walter can shape the extent of the whole narrative structure on the way to uncover the reality to subserve the order of socioeconomic system of middle class. This absolute control over the text lets Walter communicate with the reader to have their sense of empathy, "Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you" to intensify the legitimacy of his narrative (1859, 76). Moreover, oscillating between being author and character that makes Walter an insider and outsider of the text, a spot that the reader occupies where we are accredited to be the "Judge" of the events to regard their accuracy. Walter assumes a role of proofreader as he unveils the real identity of Glyde that "he was not Sir Percival Glyde at all" which indicates a sublimation of middle-class due to "Walter's role as a symbol of truth-telling chivalric legal discourse" that provides him with an opportunity for class-mobilization (1859, 521). Additionally, the liminality of Walter as an omnipotent insider/outsider centralizes him in a panopticon omphalos with the power of gaze on individuals providing a subject/object correlation between them, that is, Walter as an almighty subject who throws his repressive gaze on human objects in order to discipline their bodies by turning them into steerable objects. All these findings, which is au fond metonymical, exposes Collins's emphasis of virtuousness of middle class by endowing his authority and authorial credibility.

Another case of sublimation of middle-class can be seen in Walter's transition from a lower middle-class dependent man "spending the autumn economically between [his] mother's cottage" into a representative of upper middle-class as a gift of his virtue (1859, 4). Notably, Laura, whom Walter loves, appears to be an object of economic means for Walter as well that is identical to Glyde's, but unlike Glyde, Walter's objectification of Laura is plausible with Victorian principles since his love for her derives from his chivalric manners to get rid a woman of an illegal conspiracy that Walter regards it as, "every man's duty" to protect a damsel in distress (1859, 29). His remark, "Mine to support, to protect, to cherish, to restore. Mine to love and honour as father and brother" shows a genuine desire for Laura under his protection, as well as reification of her with a claim to control her body and self, that degrades her to an object level as Cvetkovich points, "indeed Laura is a kind of commodity, the acquisition of which guarantees to its possession" (Cvetkovic, 1989). Compared to Glyde's conducts, in this matrix of love affairs, Walter's love contains a mode of ownership of Laura in a way that let him possess her socioeconomic status as well, which provides him with a class mobilization, though his perception of her suggests she utterly is a commodity, however; this process is based on legitimacy dissimilar to Glyde. Accordingly with Victorian principles, Collins seems to establish a context that Walter grounds his conducts on laws and moral codes, initially treats her brotherly since he has "no claim on her which society sanctions, which the law allows, [...] in protecting her", and, then, stands as a paternal figure by giving her trifle jobs "as a child might have", coupled with his masculinity when he sets the rules, "that neither Marian nor Laura should stir outside the door without [his] being" in a part-fatherly, part-fraternal, and finally, part-inamorato after the enactment of Laura's marriage is an illegal and morganatic one with Glyde that the text suggests Walter's absolute agency in re-establishing the social order and class mobilization through idealised Victorian principles against lawlessness and monstrosity of aristocracy (1859, 650, 458, 456).

Certainly, the primary issue that the book, on a metaphorical and literal level, is resolved in Hartright's fight against Fosco and Glyde to expose their illegal acts, yet he is aware of its arduousness since it carries the main doctrine of the text in a bigger picture: a battle between middle class and aristocracy. Although Walter wishes to love and live with Laura, and yet he's granted this after she loses her real identity because of Fosco's sham document that replaces Laura's identity with lunatic Anne Catherick's, which ironically yields Walter a chance to marry Laura thanks to her loss of identity and states his bliss, "she was mine at last! [...] Mine to love and honour", but Walter resolves to prove her real identity and plus ensuring her taken social status back, as well as her wealth (1859, 381). Obviously, Walter is in love with Laura, however; he is also after a class mobilization through marrying Laura who is the only heiress of Limmeridge estate. Considering Walter's remark, "Mine to vindicate through all risks and all sacrifices—through the



hopeless struggle against Rank and Power, through the long fight with armed deceit", this passage is a validation that whole argument revolves around clashes of classes and Walter declares that this struggle is against "Rank" and "Power" of deceitful aristocracy (1859, 381). The text reveals its tendentiousness reasoning with Walter during his combat with aristocrats and the achievement of middle-class representative at the end not with a direct encounter, rather he succeeds to give Laura's identity back through his intelligence and control over the narrative. As mentioned, Collins associates Walter with legality both on textual and literal level, thus Walter acts like an agent to undo any illegal transactions through evidential truth: he detects a lacuna in the birth registration of Glyde that proves he is an illegitimate possessor of his identity that "deprive him at one blow of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped.", furthermore, he, with the help of his friend Pesca, discovers that Fosco is a member of secret union by which he is declared as a traitor to be murdered, so that Walter blackmails Fosco to testify and confirm Laura's identity which enables Walter to share her social status as a husband (1859, 588). On these grounds, Walter fights against aristocrat villains by "deprive of [them] of [their] weapons beforehand" as he strips Glyde of his identity and manipulate Fosco to relinquish his manipulative control over everybody (1859, 432). Thus, he overcomes their pseudo-fiction through evidential proofs as legal forms since he claimed to present only the truth at the beginning of the text in courtroom and removes all illegitimacy Fosco and Glyde causes in aid of restoring Laura's identity back with an official confirmation by Mr. Kyrle, a lawyer, approves her identity by saying, "Mr. Kyrle rose when I resumed my seat, and declared, as the legal adviser of the family, that my case was proved by the plainest evidence he had ever heard in his life" (1859, 576).

A cultural and class disorder with Fosco and Glyde's illegitimate acts against the middle-class patriarchal doctrine is fixed by their removal from the text by Walter, and through marriage of Walter and Laura who "showed more plainly the progress made by the healing influences of her new life" that Walter legally becomes "one of the landed gentry of England" and the social order is re-founded (1859, 576, 689). The establishment of Harthright family at the end of the text, an end with a marriage that so common in Victorian texts, keeps the issues inside family matrix that relieves the readers's tensions. Consequently, Walter, in his venture to reform the honour and the virtue in the text, succeeds to mobilize as he is rewarded of being an upper-middle class as the core of basis for the Victorian society, and accomplishes to overcome the fallen aristocrats that is an enactment of sublimation of middle-class ideology.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

At his best, Wilkie Collins composed his *magnum opus*, a bequest of sensational text which is quintessentially Victorian in its writing with its roots in the gothic genre, stimulating the nervous system of the readers, filled with exposition of cultural facts, criticism of gender and class, most of them quite sarcastic in his period, portrays an alternative way to obtain the truth under the aegis of middle-class principles. Besides working as fairly Victorian novel in its projection of societal formation and politics with a realist perspective, it induces the readers, with its sensational core, to create an organic response to the text as the it touches the nerves, that is, it creates psychological, as well as physiological reaction of the readers where the textuality of the book finds a ground in physical organism.

Moreover, beyond its engagement with the nervous, Collins's book suggests a wide range of different reading in its context in Victorian culture such as social formation and gender politics which consist of his views about placement of the women in the society, and his perception of class with his distinctive suggestions. It deals with the gender issues and positions itself on a sphere that gender is categorically fixed with strict tenets where it favors women those who gratuitously yield themselves to the conduct of men without questioning, whereas it harshly criticizes women that transgress into men's world outside of determined rules, and disciplines their body and mind for the sake of patriarchal middle-class as I specified above. Notably, two women character are on the fore throughout the narrative - Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie - each represents ultimate ideas of Collins' on women. In the exposition of Marian, who initially a self-centred, masculine and manipulative one, we are shown the process of silencing her out-of-control persona as she transgresses many times by interfering men's business, and the transition she gets through from an independent quasi-chaser into a castrated handmaid at the end of text where "[she] was the good angel of [their] lives" in the Limmeridge estate (1859, 646). On the other hand, Laura, under any circumstances, embodies the ideal woman in Victorian society without even a voice who complies with whatever is given, allows her own persona to be governed, shaped and owned at the hands of male characters and eventually she is rewarded with a firm marriage at the end of her suffering. According to the





account of her story, Collins appreciates Laura for being entirely a passive woman with limited perception, influence, and dedication to her husband that I note her as the ideal prototype for middle-class lady.

Besides the gender issues in the text, Collins extends his criticism to class categorization of the period in the text with his suggestive textual representational through the characterizations as specified in previous chapter. The fact that gender is a fixed category to Collins, I believe, social and economic status in the book determines how or to what extent a character behaves, succeeds, or fail. By positioning middle-class vis-à-vis aristocracy in the construction of the narrative, the text itself implies its concentration on class category, and through their representation the reader is given Collins' approach towards the each. He differentiates them from each other into strictly positive and negative categories; associates middle-class Walter with art, truthfulness, bravery, narrative authority and triumph over aristocracy as a marker of Collins' sympathy and valorization of middle-class as the sole social formation for society, while he associates Count Fosco, Sir Percival Glyde, Mr. Fairlie, who are representative of aristocracy, with corruption, illegitimacy, hypocrisy, and monstrosity, coupled with their removal from the text, in order to indicate his disdain and rejection of decadent aristocracy. Overall, through personal letters, documentation, and diaries within a context of a new-born genre as a literary form that amalgamate gothic and realist tradition, Collins offers the readers a unique experimental reading of the establishment of middle-class patriarchy with a legitimate marriage.

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